

FIVE CENTS

# BRAVE AND BOLD

A DIFFERENT COMPLETE STORY EVERY WEEK

No. 55

## AMONG RUSSIAN NIHILISTS

or The Great Assassination Plot



BY  
**JACQUES SIMON**  
*of the French Secret Service.*

"Then I will speak for the prisoner," cried Vera. She stood there superb and queenly, an eager light shining in her lustrous eyes. As Burt Alden gazed at her, he could not help murmuring to himself, "Certainly I shall be saved."



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## AMONG RUSSIAN NIHILISTS;

OR,

## The Great Assassination Plot.

By JACQUES SIMON, of the French Secret Service.

### CHAPTER I.

#### MONSIEUR PETROFFSKI'S TERRIBLE COMMISSION.

On the morning of Monday, April 27, 1896, Monsieur Jabowsky, an agent of the secret police at St. Petersburg, while seated at his desk, in his office in the grim old Third Section building, received a telegram.

He tore open the envelope, and, at a glance, devoured the contents.

Meanwhile the subordinate who had handed him the message stood by, his attitude expressing respectful attention.

Yet not once did this well-trained subordinate glance at his chief, nor did his eyes travel toward the piece of paper in Monsieur Jabowsky's hands.

At the bottom of the message was the signature of the imperial minister of police.

It was a command—and an imperative one—that Monsieur Jabowsky received.

Written in the mysterious cipher code of the upper police circle of the Russian capital, it read, when translated, thus:

"Arrest at the railway station, on arrival of forenoon

train from Berlin, a young man, supposedly French, known as Jules Vinard. He is twenty years old, five feet eight and a half inches in height; weight, one hundred and forty-five pounds. He is of light complexion, with blue eyes and wavy brown hair. He is dangerous, and his immediate and quiet arrest and safe-keeping are in the highest degree imperative. Failure in this duty means for yourself——"

There was no word in the dispatch to fill the place occupied by the dash.

Monsieur Jabowsky was able to supply the word for himself.

He shuddered slightly at the bare thought of failure.

The dispatch concluded with these words:

"As soon as you have made your arrangements, hasten to consult with me."

When Monsieur Jabowsky had finished reading he folded the paper and placed it in his pocketbook.

"Do you wish anything, sir?" asked the subordinate, still staring straight ahead at the wall in front of him.

"No," spoke the agent of police, lightly. "The mes



sage is not an important matter; it concerns only a routine duty."

It was not the policy of Monsieur Jabowsky to confide unnecessarily in his subordinates; hence his indifferent answer.

"Shall I withdraw, sir?"

"I do not need you."

The subordinate saluted and started toward the door.

"Oh, by the way," inquired the police agent, indolently, "has Monsieur Petroffski been seen about this morning?"

"He is outside, sir, close at hand."

"Be good enough to desire him to come to me."

The subordinate again saluted, then quitted the office.

Monsieur Jabowsky, left alone, leaned back in his chair, lighted a black-looking cigar and took a few reflective whiffs.

A remarkable man, this agent of secret police—a man of mystery, even to his associates.

This much was known—that he had an office in the Third Section building, which is the headquarters of the St. Petersburg secret police, that he had his own staff of under agents, detectives and secret policemen.

As to his authority, he was not known to take any orders from the head of the secret police, who had much more spacious and elaborate quarters in another part of the same building. Certainly, on the other hand, Monsieur Jabowsky never presumed to give orders to the powerful secret service chief.

Whenever any one asked concerning Monsieur Jabowsky's antecedents, his abode, the extent of his powers, or his rank in the secret service, the response invariably was:

"Ask the minister of police."

That defined the matter in a nutshell.

Peter Jabowsky was the tool of the czar's minister of police—to a certain degree the reflected radiance of that important cabinet officer.

Not more than a dozen whiffs of smoke had this man of mystery drawn from his freshly lighted cigar, when the door was again pushed open.

There entered Monsieur Petroffski, a Russian, under thirty years of age, yet believed to be Jabowsky's most trusted aid.

"Lock the door!" commanded Jabowsky. "Now sit down. It is now nine-twenty o'clock; the train from Berlin is due at ten o'clock. I want you to take at least ten picked, discreet men. One of the passengers on that train will be a young man——"

And here Monsieur Jabowsky, thanks to his excellent memory, repeated, word for word, the description of the supposed Jules Vinard, as given in the dispatch that now reposed in the pocketbook securely hidden in the police agent's inner vest pocket.

Petroffski listened attentively to the end; then he, in turn, repeated the description perfectly.

It was now indelibly fixed in his mind. Petroffski did not commit the description to paper; he was too thorough a detective officer to require the aid of memoranda.

"Rest assured, Monsieur Jabowsky," he promised, "that I will arrest the young man, if he chances to be aboard that train."

"Chance is too loose a word," retorted the superior, irritably. "You must be sure."

"I will be sure."

"Discreet, as well."

"And discreet also."

"To fail in this trust——"

"Would be disastrous," smiled Petroffski, knowingly.

"It would be more!" emphasized the other.

"Even——"

"Fatal!"

Sixty seconds later Secret Police Agent Jabowsky closed his office and hurried off to obey the summons which he had received to an interview with the minister of police.

At almost the same moment that Monsieur Jabowsky's carriage rattled away from one door six carriages hurriedly departed from as many other exits.

Five of the sextet of vehicles contained each two talented policemen in plain clothes. The sixth contained only Petroffski.

Though they departed by as many as four different roads, the carriages were all bound to the same destination—the railway depot.

"An inspiration tells me that I shall succeed, and win fame and reward," exulted the young police agent, nervously.

And yet honest, zealous Monsieur Petroffski was about to commit the greatest blunder of his life—a series of blunders, to be exact, that should wrong innocence, and plunge tragedy into many lives!

## CHAPTER II.

### THE FAIR RUSSIAN.

A fool's paradise!

No other phrase can so aptly describe the situation of at least one young person of a pair who occupied a first-class compartment in a railway carriage that was speeding toward St. Petersburg, on that same fateful morning of the 27th of April.

These fellow-travelers were strangers, thrown together by chance, when the train left Berlin the day before.

One was a young man, or boy, if you will, frank, light-hearted and gay, yet possessing all those qualities which make the American youth the most progressive and admirable type to be found in all the world.



Bert Alden was an American, and an American to the backbone, yet a year before this narrative opens he had been sent by his parents to the German university town of Heidelberg, to take a special course in chemistry under one of the most noted professors in the scientific world, for it was intended that our hero, when thoroughly fitted, should take an important position in the factory of a chemical company in which his father was largely interested.

But a year of hard study had somewhat impaired Bert's health.

His father had written him to take a few week's vacation in gay, distracting Paris.

While at the French capital he had received a pressing invitation from a Mr. Morton, his parents' friend, to visit him in St. Petersburg.

Not only was he invited to be the guest of Mr. Morton in the lively Russian capital, but he was urged to accompany him to Moscow, there to witness, during the latter part of May, the dazzling, bewildering spectacles and celebrations that would attend the coronation of the young czar, Nicholas II., and his lovely czarina.

It would be the most gorgeous royal spectacle of modern times—so Mr. Morton wrote our hero.

The imperial exchequer would be drawn upon to the extent of a least \$20,000,000 to pay the expenses of this truly regal affair.

All the governments of the world would send splendid representative delegations.

It was to be a veritable picturesque congress of nations—a jubilee of joy let loose—*fête* after *fête*—a succession of glorious parades—pageants of pomp and power.

Even night was to be as day in historic old Moscow, for the illuminations, aided by modern science, were to be on a grander scale than anything ever before attempted.

Weeks before the event little else seemed to be discussed in the public places of Paris.

No wonder that Bert Alden was eager to accept the invitation.

He sent a cablegram to his father, asking permission. And Mr. Alden had cabled back:

"Go, by all means. You will never again have such an opportunity. Draw upon me for funds."

Within six hours after the receipt of that cablegram Bert left Paris.

It was when the train left Berlin that he found himself face to face with the fascinating creature in whose company we now find him.

Through the afternoon and night there had been a third person in the compartment—an old lady who had dozed and snored most of the time.

When daylight came, soon after crossing the Russian

frontier, the old lady had quitted the compartment, leaving the young people to themselves during the remainder of the journey to the Russian capital.

All too quickly was the time passing to please the impressionable young Alden.

Until two hours ago they had sat on opposite seats, facing each other. Now they were sitting side by side, laughing and chatting, and so irresistible did the lively Russian girl prove, that the young American felt hardly able to withdraw his gaze from her face.

Vera Menikoff, her name was. She lived in St. Petersburg.

That much she had told our hero, and, since she had stopped there, he, with true American gallantry, had refrained from pressing her for further particulars concerning her charming self.

Yet she certainly belonged to an aristocratic Russian family, for her conversation, her manners, her easy, natural dignity, and all the other signs proclaimed her to be one "to the manor born."

Their conversation had been carried on in French—a language in which both were fluent.

Vera picked up a Parisian magazine, found a brilliantly witty article, and read it aloud.

"The French are so clever, so irresistible," she commented. "Even their writers charm one where the writers of other nations are dull. I have always found the French the ideal race. Do you know, monsieur," she added, gracefully, "you look a great deal like a Frenchman? And you speak their language like a native."

Bert glowed at this flattering praise.

"But I am an American," he laughingly protested. "An American, and heartily proud of it. It is a grander title than any other—unless," he added, gallantly, "it is to be a Russian."

"Do they teach the art of flattery so well as that in the prosy old German town of Heidelberg!" she questioned, for Bert had told her much concerning himself and his plans.

"No," laughed Bert. "And I beg you not to think me guilty of mere politeness. We Americans love Russians—all Russians," he amended, as a blush mantled his companion's cheek.

"Yet you Americans are so different from the Russians," murmured the girl. "In your country all claim to be equals; even the president must not think himself better than a laborer. While, in our country, we have the czar and czarina, the princes and grand dukes, all the grades of nobility—everything goes by caste, all the way down to the fellow who was a serf, a slave, a generation or two ago. We have soldiers, a hundred to your one, and government officers enough to supply your country for a century or two."



"You have left one prominent Russian out of your enumeration, Miss Menikoff."

"Which one?"

"The nihilist."

The girl gave a start, then threw a swift, scrutinizing glance at Bert.

"That name," she spoke, fearfully, "you must never pronounce."

"Why not?"

"Because, if you do, you may be suspected."

"Of what, please?"

"Of belonging to that terrible fraternity."

"But that would be absurd."

"Nothing is absurd," protested the girl, vehemently. "Believe me, while in Russia it is well to take the advice I have given you."

"It is accepted, with thanks, and will be rigidly followed, Miss Menikoff."

Vera picked up her satchel, opened it, and searched among its closely packed contents.

A sudden jolt of the train threw it from her lap, and many articles rolled out on the floor—among them a jeweled revolver and a small bottle.

The latter the girl recovered so quickly that our hero could not even guess at its contents, but he picked up the weapon and handed it to her.

"I hope you will not mention this," she cried, pleadingly. "In Russia it is perilous for a woman to be known to carry a deadly weapon."

"I have already forgotten that I saw it," was Bert's assurance.

And then, as if speaking of a matter that had been on her mind for some time, the fair Russian continued:

"Another favor I have to beg of you."

"It is granted."

"The train will soon stop at another station twenty miles from St. Petersburg. Leave me, then, and go into another compartment."

"I will obey you, though very reluctantly, I confess," replied Bert.

"You will increase my safety by so doing."

"I would make any sacrifice for you, Miss Menikoff."

"Then one more favor?"

"Granted."

"Should any one ask you, deny that you know me, or have seen me."

Bert looked at her, in momentary amazement, but replied:

"Your command is sufficient."

"You will not forget?"

"I have given you an American's promise," was the stout answer.

At the next stop Bert changed to another compartment.

During the last hour of the journey the boy's mind was divided between sensations of regret and curiosity.

Then the train rolled into the station at St. Petersburg. As our hero alighted, the sight of him occasioned a great start to one individual—Monsieur Petroffski.

### CHAPTER III.

#### AT THE "THIRD SECTION."

On stepping from the train Bert halted and gazed all about him.

Yet he looked in vain, in that throng, for the face of Mr. Morton.

Vera Menikoff passed our hero without, apparently, seeing him.

Remembering her earnest injunction, Bert did not raise his hat; in fact, paid no attention to her.

But, happening to turn after the girl had gone some distance down the depot, Alden was just in time to see a dandified-looking young Russian cast a languishing smile at her.

Bert's hot blood surged to his face. He felt a momentary temptation to rush forward and thrash this insolent "masher," but discretion came to his aid.

"Mr. Morton may have been delayed," he reflected, turning his thoughts again to his host. "I will walk toward the street entrance."

He did so. Hardly had he gone a dozen yards when he heard an eager voice behind him murmur:

"Jules, my dear friend!"

The voice was so close to him that Bert turned quickly.

Leering into his own was the smiling face of the young Russian who had, a moment before, attempted to make an impression upon Vera Menikoff.

"The insolent puppy!" muttered our hero, under his breath, as he gave the stranger a black look.

"Jules, do not jest; I would know you among a thousand," murmured the Russian, in French, and speaking in what he intended to be a friendly tone.

"I congratulate you," mocked Bert; "but you have made a mistake."

"Oh, no," laughed the Russian.

Bert turned upon his heel and started to walk away from the fellow.

"Hold on, my dear Jules," protested the Russian, taking him, not forcibly, by the arm.

"A Muscovite bunco-steerer," thought our hero. "I'll sicken him. Let go," he warned, aloud.

"Now don't get angry."

But that was exactly what Bert did. Besides, he had now an excuse for avenging the insult to Vera Menikoff.

Jerking his arm free, and swinging his fist, the young American landed a heavy blow on the Russian's neck.

Straight to the floor, in a heap, went the dandy.



Not a bit hurt was he, however, and, in another instant, he was on his feet.

Meanwhile, several uniformed policemen rushed up.

They pounced upon our hero, seized him, and held him in such a grip that to struggle would have been useless exertion.

"*Sacre bleu!*" muttered the dandy, in French. "You are foolish to assault me. I am an agent of police."

"But why did you lay hands on me?" demanded the American.

"Monsieur, I desired your company."

"Do I understand that you arrest me?"

"Assuredly."

"*Diable!* what for?"

"That I cannot explain here. Come!"

Another man, also in plain clothes, stepped up to Bert, on the other side, as the uniformed policeman released him.

Though many people witnessed the arrest, no one lingered to look on. Russian crowds know the danger of curiosity!

Utterly bewildered at the turn affairs had taken, the young American submitted to being led out between the two police agents.

Outside the railway station, they approached a waiting cab.

"Enter," said one of the Russians, opening the door.

Bert obeyed, the first agent taking a seat beside him, while the other sat facing them.

Monsieur Petroffski, who had taken no apparent part in the affair, had directed the arrest from a distance by means of signals imperceptible to all save his subordinates.

That jubilant young detective now followed our trio in a second cab.

Still bewildered, our hero stared at his captors.

"What does this mean?" he demanded.

"Oh, a mere formality," replied the police agent whom he had knocked down.

"Come," insisted Bert, "I am certainly entitled to a better explanation than that."

"You can expect none from us, monsieur——"

"*Diable!*"

"And none should know it better than you."

"Say, that is rich!" protested Bert.

But no persuasion could induce the agents to talk, and our hero relapsed into moody, curious silence.

He gave no heed to the streets through which they were driving, for the very simple reason that the curtains of the cab windows were drawn down.

At length the carriage halted. One of the agents poked the curtains aside a bit, and then announced:

"Here we are."

The door was opened and our hero was led out.

He had barely time to notice the massive proportions of the gray stone building before which they had stopped, when he was led in through a narrow doorway.

Then followed a seemingly interminable march through long corridors and short passageways.

A veritable maze, our hero thought it, yet not once did his guides pause or appear confused.

Suddenly they halted and knocked upon a door. It was instantly opened for them by an attendant.

Through two other doors the police agents conducted the young American.

Into the third room Bert was pushed.

There he found three persons—the first two seated at a desk, the third a policeman in uniform.

The door through which the American had entered was closed behind him.

"You may leave us," commanded one of the men at the desk—Monsieur Jabowsky.

The policeman saluted and went out.

Bert, keenly observant of all about him, concluded that Monsieur Jabowsky must be an important official, and the other man a clerk.

"Write down the name," commanded Jabowsky, "of Jules Vinard."

The clerk obeyed, with a noisy scratching of his pen.

"Prisoner," commanded the police agent, "come nearer. There—stand there. That is right. Now, then, your name is Jules Vinard, is it not?"

"Not to the best of my knowledge," remarked the bewildered Bert.

"How?"

"I am known in my own country as Albert Alden."

"And what is your country?"

"The United States of America."

"Bah!"

"Here is my passport. Will you please to examine it?"

"Bah!"

"So you were pleased to observe before, sir," retorted Bert, his anger rising fast. "Sir, I suppose I am arrested by men under your orders. Now, I assert my American citizenship; I demand that you let me communicate with my fellow-countryman, the American Minister to Russia."

"The American minister," leered Monsieur Jabowsky, "has nothing to do with this matter."

His tone was so crisp, his manner so fearlessly insulting, that our hero realized the utter helplessness of his position.

"You will see," continued Monsieur Jabowsky, "that the best thing for you to do will be to answer my questions."

"*Diable!* man! haven't I done so?"

"Not truthfully. Now, then, since you admit that you are Jules Vinard——"



"But I don't."

"How long since you were in Paris?"

"Since the day before yesterday."

"For what purpose are you in Russia?"

"To see something of the country, and, if possible, to witness, next month, the coronation of the czar."

"Ah!" cried Monsieur Jabowsky, eagerly, "now we are getting at the truth!"

"I would have told you that much at the start, if you had asked me," blurted the indignant boy.

"Had you a companion on the journey?"

Bert was on the point of answering "Yes," when suddenly he remembered the strange request of Vera Menikoff, and his promise to her.

So, instead, he replied:

"I had several; I paid no particular heed to them."

"Liar!" shouted Monsieur Jabowsky, springing to his feet. "Remember that a confession may save you from Siberia or the hangman!"

"I have no confession to make," answered Bert, firmly. Jabowsky touched a bell.

"Take him out and search him," he said, to two policemen who entered.

Bert was led into an adjoining room.

One of the policemen held a lantern up, while the other, without prefacing the act by a single word, began to search through the American's pockets.

This was speedily completed. The searcher intimated, by a gesture, that the prisoner was to take off his coat.

Bert wonderingly obeyed. The search went on, and everything found in his pockets was dumped into a small canvas pouch.

One by one he was forced to take off each garment, until he stood completely nude.

The belt around his waist that contained his money did not escape the general confiscation. The linings of his garments were examined with the minutest care. Even the heels and soles of his shoes were investigated. The lining of his hat came in for a most minute inspection.

Not so much as a sheet of cigarette paper could have been hidden from the gaze of that astute and experienced searcher.

Even our hero's watch and chain went into the pouch, after the case had been opened and thoroughly scrutinized.

At last the search was over. The policeman who had been most active in the affair pointed to the heap of clothing on the floor, and muttered a few words in his incomprehensible jargon.

Bert understood that he was to resume his raiment, and most willingly obeyed.

He was led back into the other room.

Monsieur Jabowsky and his clerk were still seated at

the desk. Before the police agent were spread all the articles that had been taken from the prisoner.

Jabowsky eyed him keenly, without speaking, so Bert began:

"Now that you have gone through all my effects, sir, I hope that you will see no further need of detaining me."

"A few more questions," was the cold response. "Stand there, where I can get a better look at you."

As he took up this new position, however, our hero's glance fell upon a cabinet at the side of the apartment.

Hung before it was a cloth curtain. In front of the curtain now stood the man who had searched him.

"First question," commenced Monsieur Jabowsky, categorically. "Do you wish to retract any of your former statements?"

"No, sir."

"You still claim to be an American?"

"Assuredly. With your permission, I will prove it."

"And do you not remember, particularly, any of your companions during the journey?"

"Not particularly."

Monsieur Jabowsky coughed. In a twinkling the man before the curtain stepped aside, clutching the cloth, and exposing the interior of the cabinet.

The sight that met our hero's eyes was well calculated to destroy his self-possession.

Standing inside the cabinet, as pallid as if just taken from the tomb, her face distorted with mental anguish, every feature expressive of the deepest terror, stood Vera Menikoff.

Her lips did not move. She gazed straight before her as if she saw no one.

The police agent's harsh tones rasped triumphantly on our hero's ears.

"Now, Monsieur Jules Vinard, do you dare deny that you remember any of your fellow-travelers?"

But the sight of that piteous, girlish face aroused all the heroism, all the chivalry, in Bert Alden's nature.

In a voice low, but distinct and calm, he answered:

"Sir, I repeat my denial."

"Look again at that creature!" thundered Monsieur Jabowsky. "Take my assurance, young man, that you are gazing upon the face of one of Russia's most infamous criminals. Will you forswear your liberty, perhaps your life, to shield such a woman? Answer me, boy, have you ever seen her before?"

Even such an appeal, so intensely fraught with self-interest, could not swerve Bert from adherence to his promise.

He gazed long and earnestly at the face of Vera Menikoff. Her eyes, though filled with terror, were lighted by no gleam of recognition.

Steeling himself to a most perfect piece of acting, the



young American turned enough to look squarely into the eyes of Monsieur Jabowsky.

Again came his fervent declaration:

"I have never seen this girl before."

The police agent made a quick sign. With the quickness of lightning his subordinate clutched Vera by the wrist, yanked her from the cabinet, and dragged her swiftly from the room.

As the door closed Monsieur Jabowsky, his face livid with passion, sprang to his feet and confronted Bert.

"Liar! perjurer!" hissed the Russian. "You have condemned yourself out of your own mouth. You deserve the fearful fate that awaits you, for you have deliberately invoked it!"

Pausing an instant for breath, Monsieur Jabowsky shouted:

"The girl herself has confessed all to me, and her confession brands you as the most infamous fiend of the century! You are already condemned! You shall not even have a trial!"

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### AN ORDEAL OF FIRE!

As Monsieur Jabowsky concluded his fierce denunciation, he made a gesture that caused the policemen to quit the office in a hurry.

There remained, now, only the police agent, our hero and the stolid, impassive clerk—the latter a mere writing machine, who never presumed to be in his master's way.

Monsieur Jabowsky eyed the young American closely, plainly enjoying the dismay that his words had caused the prisoner.

For Bert Alden was dismayed—appalled—as who would not have been in his predicament!

Complete triumph rang in Monsieur Jabowsky's tone when, at last, he broke the pause.

"Well, you have heard me," he uttered, harshly. "What do you say to my statement?"

Up came Bert's head, haughtily poised on well-squared shoulders. Wrath flashed from his eyes.

"That your statement, sir," he retorted, "does credit to your powers of invention!"

Vanished was the last vestige of alarm. Conscious innocence arose superior to brutal accusation.

"So!" sneered Monsieur Jabowsky, riveting his gaze upon the "suspect's" face.

"Have you anything more to say to me?" demanded Bert.

"Perhaps much, perhaps little," was the jeering answer. "Rest assured that I am not yet through with you."

"Oh, I supposed, sir, that, having made up your mind about me, you would not think it worth while to devote any more time to me."

Monsieur Jabowsky's eyes flashed dangerously.

This American boy's air of calm defiance was discomposing in the extreme.

Where the police agent had expected a crushing triumph, he had only met defeat, so far.

"Perhaps," continued Bert, ironically, "now that the young lady has confessed, you would like to have me do the same?"

Jabowsky's pulse beat faster, though he coldly replied:

"It might be beneficial for you."

"If you care to hear," resumed Bert, "all that I know about the young lady——"

"Go on," desired the police agent, and the attentive clerk dipped his pen in the inkwell.

"What I can tell you about her——" Bert hesitated.

"Ah! Now you are coming to your senses!" cried the police agent. "As you were saying, what you know about this young lady——"

"Is——"

"Speak faster."

"Nothing!"

A savage Muscovite oath fell from the lips of Jabowsky. He took one threatening step toward our hero, but checked himself.

"If I am not indiscreet, sir," went on Bert, with feigned humility, "I would like to ask one question."

"What is it?"

"Was that girl whom you showed me in the cabinet a milliner's dummy made of wax?"

The mocking irony of this query rendered Monsieur Jabowsky nearly frantic with anger.

The color fled from his face, leaving it white and ugly.

For a moment he meditated ordering the "impudent" American scourged with twenty lashes.

But, reflecting that he must keep his temper if he would win over this unexpectedly clever young man, the police agent simply answered:

"Be good enough to pick up this chair and carry it over to that corner."

"Certainly," smiled Bert, readily obeying.

"Now, be good enough to sit on that chair, keeping your back turned to the rest of the room, and your eyes upon the corner alone."

Bert again complied, at the same time inquiring:

"Anything else?"

"Oblige me by neither turning nor speaking until I request you to do so."

Bert made no answer.

"What is going to happen now?" he wondered.

He did not fear to sit with his back turned on the police agent. He felt, instinctively, confidence that the Russian was too worthy a foeman to assail him from the rear.

Meanwhile Monsieur Jabowsky lighted another of his



long black cigars, and sat smoking and reflecting, but seldom letting his gaze wander from the back of the supposed Jules Vinard.

"Never tell the truth to a prisoner, unless you have the best of reasons for so doing."

That was one of the professional maxims of this astute official.

The longer Jabowsky smoked the better defined became his new plan of procedure.

He would turn this "suspect" loose for a little while—but only that he might the more surely entrap him!

"Jules Vinard!" he suddenly called, in a voice of thunder.

Our hero made no answer.

"Young man, do you hear me?" volleyed the official.

"Oh, are you addressing me, sir?" came quietly from Alden.

"Yes, you!"

"At your service, sir," returned the young American, rising from his chair and stepping forward.

"I have concluded, young man, to release you."

Joy shone in Bert's face.

"But only on condition that you report to me to-morrow morning at ten o'clock."

"Then——"

"Ask no questions," was the stern admonition. "Now, I must tell you that, until after you have seen me to-morrow morning, I shall require you to sojourn at the hotel to which I am going to send you."

"That's easy—very."

"Should you receive a summons to appear before me earlier, at any time of the day or night, obey it instantly. Monsieur Jabowsky is my name, and this office is in the Third Section building."

"The Third Section?" repeated Bert, paling slightly. He had read many weird, grisly tales of the doings of that noted headquarters of the Russian secret police.

"Now go," ordered Jabowsky. "Here is a special passport for twenty-four hours. Show it to the policeman you will find outside the door, and he will conduct you to the right hotel. Stay, here are your valuables. Take them."

Bert quickly obeyed, and making a bow to Monsieur Jabowsky, he quitted the office with a much lighter heart.

"Go, young fool!" muttered the agent, under his breath. "Go, and run your neck into my noose."

Our hero was conducted by the policeman to a small, dingy, inferior-looking Russian hotel, seven or eight blocks away from the Third Section building.

He wrote his name upon the hotel register, against which the clerk wrote copious extracts from the "special passport."

As soon after as possible our hero indited a long letter,

in which he fully stated his case, to the American Minister to Russia. He concluded by urging that official to take prompt action in his behalf.

How to forward this letter to the American Legation was a question that perplexed our hero.

He finally solved it. Outside of the hotel he encountered a *moujik*, or Russian peasant, who understood a few words of French.

Would the *moujik* undertake an errand for liberal pay? The *moujik* would be delighted to serve his excellency, for the mere pleasure of obliging a fellow-creature, but he was a poor man with a large family, and——

Bert handed the letter, and a five-rouble piece, to the *moujik*, and the latter started off on his errand at as fast a walk as his legs would carry him.

Sauntering back into the hotel, Bert lounged about until evening, when he ate a wretched native dinner.

Then, learning from the clerk that the thoroughfare upon which the hotel fronted was the famous Nevsky Prospekt, or "Broadway," of St. Petersburg, Bert Alden stepped outside for an after-dark stroll along the square to which he was restricted.

It was destined to be, for him, a fatal walk!

## CHAPTER V.

### A STRANGE MEETING.

Few thoroughfares in the world are more lively or gay than is the Nevsky Prospekt in spring.

It teems and throbs with life.

After walking for some distance, Bert halted and stood on the corner that bounded his limit of promenade in one direction.

"I may as well go back to the hotel. Besides," he reflected, "the American minister will undoubtedly send one of his subordinates to see me. It will not do to be out when he comes."

But no sooner had this thought shaped itself than something crossed his vision that chased other thoughts away.

That something was a young lady, richly dressed, though, oddly enough, on foot, who was walking swiftly along on the other side of the Prospekt.

"Vera Menikoff!" ejaculated Bert, under his breath.

Then followed this thought:

"That proves, thank Heaven, that she has been spared from harm at the Third Section!"

While he stood gazing eagerly after her, Bert saw her ascend the steps leading up to a rather fine-looking old house that stood halfway down the next block.

She rang the street bell, and then stood waiting.

"Her home," decided Bert. "Shall I venture down there to speak to her!"

While he stood debating, Vera, half concealed in the



doorway, stood tapping one small foot with impatience at the delay of those inside.

"Here goes!" muttered Bert. "Perhaps she may invite me to call upon her to-morrow."

Our hero crossed the Pospekt and continued down the next square.

Vera still stood outside. Bert was only a few feet away when the door opened.

Turning just before she entered the house, Mademoiselle Menikoff caught sight of Bert.

She smiled, made a gracious sign for him to follow her, and disappeared through the open doorway.

Never did knight of old obey more eagerly than did Bert Alden.

Eagerly springing up the steps, he entered a long, dimly lighted hallway.

He caught sight of Vera's figure as she entered the room at the farther end.

Following, conscious, though heedless, of the presence of a man who had opened the door, Bert entered a library just as Vera Menikoff, throwing aside a cloak, appeared before him as a vision of captivating loveliness.

She came toward him with outstretched hands, but suddenly stopped, crying, as if in surprise:

"Oh, is it you, monsieur?"

And she drew back, as though abashed.

"Yes, it is I, Miss Menikoff," replied Bert, surprised in turn at her sudden astonishment.

Vera sprang forward, taking both his hands in hers. Gratitude shone in her eyes, as she murmured, musically:

"I must thank you for your noble devotion to me this forenoon. You were superb!"

"And you are superb now," rejoined Bert.

The perfumery of her presence, the beauty and fascination of this fair young Russian almost intoxicated him for the moment. His brain felt giddy.

A male servant glided into the room, paused and bowed before the girl.

"Mademoiselle, your mother——"

Vera interrupted with a quick gesture of surprise.

Then recovering herself, she demanded:

"Your message?"

"Your mother, mademoiselle, is ill, and desires to see you immediately."

"Permit me to take my leave," murmured Bert, rising to his feet. "To-morrow, with your permission, I will call to inquire after your mother's health."

The servant was already in the hallway.

Vera rested one hand on the young American's arm.

"You will do me a great favor?" she asked, looking up at him, pleadingly.

"A thousand, Miss Menikoff," and the fascinated youth did not intend to exaggerate.

"Do not call."

"Ah!" and Bert's face betrayed his disappointment.

"Am I asking so much, then?"

"Miss Menikoff," he protested, hesitatingly, "your request is almost cruel. Nevertheless, I shall unquestionably obey you, for—for I am your friend."

"Always remember that," said Vera, earnestly. "Rest assured, if you desire to continue my acquaintance, you shall have an opportunity—when the time comes."

"I thank you a thousand times."

"But I warn you," she added, with a merry smile.

"Of what?"

"My friendship is a very exacting affair. I hold my friends liable for any service at any time."

"Trust me," Bert responded, "and try me. But I am keeping you from your mother, mademoiselle, and I reproach myself."

He bowed, and Vera, leaving him to the pilotage of the man-servant, hurried up the stairs.

Bert left the house and proceeded in the direction of his hotel.

Bump! Some one had collided with our hero.

"Perdition!" growled an angry voice; and Bert turned to find himself confronted by an angry, dandified young military officer in full uniform.

"Do you know no better than to run into people in that fashion?" demanded the young officer, in excellent French. His alcoholic breath indicated that he had drunk too deeply.

"To the best of my observation, it was your fault!" replied Bert, quietly.

"*Peste!* do you dare say that to me? Take that, then—*garcon!*"

Whack! whack! Two blows of the officer's light walking stick fell across Bert's shoulders.

Bert Alden was not the sort of youth who could endure insult and injury patiently.

In a twinkling he had wrenched the stick out of the other's hand.

Snap! Bert broke it in two.

What followed happened almost more quickly than the eye could follow.

With a fragment of the stick Alden struck the astonished officer across the right cheek; with the other he struck him a smart blow on the left cheek.

Then, calmly tossing the broken cane into the gutter, Bert added:

"I regret that you made your chastisement necessary."

"You shall have further cause to regret it," hissed the officer, unfastening two or three buttons of his coat, in order to get at his cardcase. "Your card, monsieur?"

"What do you want of it?"



"Ah! Then perhaps monsieur does not carry a card!" sneeringly. "Perhaps monsieur has no need for one."

Without a word Bert produced one of his visiting cards, and handed it to the other.

"You are stopping—where?"

"In the hotel there."

"Here is my card; you shall hear from me to-morrow."

The officer walked rapidly away.

"A duel now, eh?" muttered Bert, grimly. "That, on top of my other adventures to-day, convinces me that St. Petersburg must be a very lively place to live in."

Walking into the hotel, he inquired of the clerk whether there had been any callers or messages for him.

"Nothing and nobody for monsieur," was the reply.

"Strange that I do not hear from the American ambassador," thought our hero.

As it was already late, our hero went direct to his room.

There he glanced at the card handed him by the young military officer. Printed in French, it read in English:

"Count John Souvieski, Lieutenant Thirteenth Hussars, His Imperial Majesty's Army."

"Every other man in Russia seems to be a count," laughed Bert.

Undressing, he threw himself into bed.

It was an uncomfortable mattress; the pillows were wretchedly hard, but our hero fell into a deep, uncomplaining slumber.

• When he awoke, in the morning, his watch showed him that it was past eight o'clock.

Springing out of bed, he dressed, descended to the café, breakfasted on a roll and coffee, and then inquired of the clerk where he could engage a cab.

"Pardon," interposed a man, who had been standing in the background of the office, "you wish to see Monsieur Jabowsky? Very good; I will conduct you to him."

Twenty minutes later our hero stood in the presence of the redoubtable police agent and the latter's machine-like clerk.

"So," began Monsieur Jabowsky, accusingly, "you have disobeyed my injunction by writing a letter to the American ambassador?"

"As an American citizen, I had a right to," replied Bert, coldly. "So the American Legation has sent word to you?"

"Here is the letter that you wrote," and Bert's own epistle was held up before his eyes. "It never reached the American Legation."

"I do not understand you, sir."

"It was placed in my hands very soon after you dispatched it by a messenger."

Our hero comprehended now. There is nothing slow about the Russian police methods!

Monsieur Jabowsky's next remark was a startler:

"I have decided, young man, to release you from surveillance. You are free to go where, and do what, you please!"

## CHAPTER VI.

"THERE NEVER WAS AN AMERICAN COWARD!"

Was the police agent sincere in the words just quoted?

I will answer it by the remark that several years of very peculiar secret police service had produced their effect upon the character of Monsieur Jabowsky.

It was one of his maxims that it is seldom wise—for a police agent—to be sincere.

One exception he allowed, and strictly observed. Monsieur Jabowsky was never otherwise than honest and loyal in his relations with the imperial minister of police.

Yet whatever the police agent's intentions were respecting our hero, he now treated him with considerable courtesy.

He not only apologized for the "necessary trouble" to which he had put our hero, but advised him to be very careful, while in Russia, as to the kind of company he kept.

"And now, young man, you will find at the door, to which my man will conduct you, a carriage waiting that will convey you back to your hotel."

"But I am no longer to be restricted to that hotel?"

"You are as free as air," was the impressive response; "that is, of course, within the limitations of the laws of the empire."

Bert Alden enjoyed his ride back to the hotel. He was now free to hunt up his friend, Mr. Morton, and to begin to enjoy his stay in Russia.

Very likely he would not have taken the trouble to return to the hotel, but for two facts—the bill there was unpaid, and his baggage had been sent there by the secret police, after a thorough overhauling.

"I wish to pay my account," he said, to the clerk, upon entering the office. "As to my baggage, I will send for that later in the day."

"Monsieur may possibly have another hour's use for his room," said the clerk; "this gentleman"—holding up a card—"called, and I took the liberty of asking him to wait in monsieur's room."

The card bore the name of Capt. Bavortskoff, of the Hussars, while in one corner of the card was written:

*"A part de Monsieur le Comte Souvieski."*

Bert went up to his room.

Capt. Bavortskoff, attired in fatigue uniform, was there.

"I seek Monsieur Albert Alden," he said, rising.

"I am he."



"Very good. My principal, Lieut. Souvieski, desired me to arrange a little matter which he has intrusted to me."

"What matter?" demanded Bert, bluntly.

"You insulted him——"

"Pardon me, captain. Your friend took the liberty of striking me two blows over the shoulders with his cane. I took the cane from him, and returned the blows. That is all."

"I am the bearer of his challenge."

"A challenge for what?" asked Bert, ironically.

Capt. Bavortskoff shrugged his shoulders.

"To fight, of course—for satisfaction."

"What?" demanded Bert, with feigned surprise. "Does he want another encounter with canes? Didn't he get sufficient last night?"

"You are jesting on a sorry subject, Monsieur Alden," rebuked the captain. "Certainly you must be aware that you are challenged to a duel."

"A duel?" echoed Bert. "It won't come off, then. Tell your friend, if he is anxious to be killed, to die in the honest service of his country and his emperor. Why, in my country, sir, dueling is stamped as a crime, and the duelist is branded as a criminal."

"Then I am sorry for the Americans," retorted Bavortskoff, with an air of calm contempt. "It seems that they are a race of cowards!"

One who has never been abroad, who has seen but little of the world, cannot, perhaps, understand how deep and humiliating is such a thrust at the courage of his fellow-countrymen.

Alden took a step forward, his face white with indignation.

"That is not true!" he declared, huskily. "There never yet was an American coward!"

Again the captain shrugged his shoulders.

"I have no desire to dispute you," he retorted. "I judge only by what I see and hear. In this part of the world, every man of courage and honor fights when challenged. Do you accept?"

Bert Alden's blood was boiling up. The whole notion of dueling was repugnant to him, yet, in this crisis, he could not endure that this calm, ironical and undoubtedly courageous captain should taunt the whole American people with cowardice.

"Well, do you accept?" repeated Bavortskoff.

"Yes, I do!"

The preliminaries were at once settled. The captain promised to find Bert a second.

Promptly at the appointed time Bert and Lieut. Souvieski faced each other, in a secluded corner of the Paoloff Garden.

Each had removed coat and vest, and each now stood with bare-bladed rapier in hand.

Close to the contestants stood their seconds.

In the background a Russian army surgeon smoked his cigarette while standing over an assortment of bandages and instruments.

"On guard!" shouted Bavortskoff, and the clash of steel rang out, as the two rapiers crossed.

Then came the signal—the duel was on.

Bert Alden, who all along had maintained an admirable composure, had surely sad need of it.

Himself less than an amateur swordsman, he was pitted against a savage fellow whose profession was of the sword.

Every clash of the sword, every glint of the other's steel as it flashed before Bert's eyes, appeared to him like the stroke of fate.

It would be so easy for Souvieski to kill him, if he were so minded, in this uneven duel.

While all the world knows that an indifferent swordsman has hardly a single chance against an expert fencer, yet it sometimes happens that he who has had absolutely no experience with a rapier is a dangerous antagonist.

The reason is this—that the tyro, in his desperate but unskilled efforts to defend himself, may make a dozen strokes or lunges in succession that are absolutely unknown to masters of the sword.

And it is these erratic thrusts that are the hardest sometimes to avoid.

Hence Bert Alden was suddenly and greatly surprised to see Souvieski drop his sword and stifle the groan that came to his lips.

It had all happened in the twinkling of an eye.

One of the young American's clumsy strokes had struck the Russian across the right arm with sufficient force to bring a quick spurt of blood.

"Stop!" cried Capt. Bavortskoff. "My principal has been wounded. Doctor, examine the cut and let us know whether this affair can go on."

"It is nothing," snarled the amazed Souvieski, bending over to pick up his sword. "A thousand thunders! Am I to let this stripling triumph because he has succeeded in giving me a trifling scratch on the arm?"

"Pardon, lieutenant," murmured the surgeon, taking hold of Souvieski's wrist and beginning to tear away the shirt sleeve.

Souvieski swore frightfully at this interruption.

Panting, and decidedly perplexed, Alden stood still, the point of his weapon touching the ground.

Of them all, he was the most surprised that he had drawn the first blood.

"Ah!" cried the doctor, pursing up his lips as he bared the spot where the wound was and observed the little jets of blood that were coming from the cut as if pumped out.

"What is it?" demanded the lieutenant.



"Be silent one moment," ordered the doctor. "I must apply the tourniquet."

The tourniquet, it may be explained, is an instrument that is applied to a bleeding limb to shut off the flow of blood.

The surgeon placed the tourniquet on Souvieski's arm, not far above the wound.

A few twists of the instrument, and the blood ceased to spurt.

"Now, make haste," cried the lieutenant, impatiently. "Bind up that scratch, if you must, for I am impatient to punish my adversary."

"Lieutenant," replied the surgeon, gravely, "you will fight no more to-day. It was an artery that was severed. I must tie it. Should it break open afresh, you would be in great danger of bleeding to death."

Souvieski ground his teeth and swore frightfully.

A cry of pity escaped Bert Alden.

The lieutenant looked at him in some surprise.

"Surely," he asked, "you do not regret having saved your life?"

"By no means," retorted Bert, "but, assuredly, I am sorry to have given you so serious a wound."

"That, monsieur, is a most unusual feeling to have for an adversary in a duel."

"Perhaps, but this meeting was not of my seeking. I was opposed to a duel until I was taunted with the cowardice of my nation. It was for the American honor that I stood up before you—not because I have any animosity toward you."

The seconds here interfered, stating that, owing to the surgeon's verdict, it was manifestly impossible to think of renewing the combat.

"For my part, I declare that honor has been satisfied," pronounced Capt. Bavortskoff.

"Then I, myself, propose a reconciliation," cried Lieut. Souvieski. "Monsieur Alden, I congratulate you upon your triumph."

"It was only a blunder; I don't know how I did it," Bert modestly admitted. "I never fenced before."

"Then all the more credit to your courage for facing a soldier," said Souvieski, warmly. "Monsieur Alden, now that the surgeon and our late seconds have declared that more fighting is out of the question, will you honor me with your hand?"

"With all the pleasure in the world," came promptly, from Bert.

"Pardon a soldier for giving his left hand," begged the lieutenant.

"It is my fault, monsieur, that your right hand is not of good service to you."

"Never repeat that remark, I beg of you, my friend."

"Let us go into that building over there," proposed the

surgeon, nodding his head in the direction of a café at the corner of the garden. "There we can get a room to ourselves, and I can more properly tie the artery and bind that wound."

"And while we are there," proposed Souvieski, "suppose that you all accept my invitation to dinner? Presently I shall be very hungry."

The little party repaired to the café.

The lieutenant's wound was dressed. It was but trifling, providing it were given proper opportunity to heal.

Then followed the dinner. Despite the tragic business that had brought these five men together, the meal was a jolly affair.

The reconciliation became complete.

"Monsieur Alden," said the lieutenant, "promise that you will visit me soon at my quarters at the barracks."

Bert gave the promise without reluctance.

Under the genial influence of the present surroundings our hero began to admire Souvieski.

Souvieski, as the dinner was breaking up, extended his left hand to our hero, adding:

"Here's to many more pleasant meetings, Monsieur Alden."

And the two shook hands again.

Then Bert entered a carriage.

The address that the young American gave was that of the St. Petersburg home of Mr. Morton.

It was with feelings of pleasant anticipation that our hero went to renew the acquaintance of this old friend.

At the same time, he breathed a fervent inward prayer that all his untoward adventures in Russia were at an end.

"Now I have only to see the sights and to enjoy myself," he murmured to himself.

Ah! if he had but known.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE FACE IN THE MIRROR.

The residence before which Bert's carriage presently halted was in one of the pleasantest and most aristocratic sections of Russia's northernmost capital.

After paying the driver and dismissing him, Bert ascended the steps and rang.

He was not kept long waiting, but the servant who opened the door understood only Russian.

While Bert was trying to explain that he wished to see Mr. Morton, a voice from the depths of the corridor exclaimed:

"Why, that must be young Alden!"

And the next moment our hero's hands were clasped in those of a portly, jovial-looking, middle-aged gentleman.

"Bert, my boy, thank Heaven that you are here safe and sound. I drove to the railway station to meet you yesterday afternoon, but on the way my carriage broke down,



and I arrived there a few moments too late. So you have reached St. Petersburg at last."

And he led the way into the library.

Mr. Morton lighted a cigar himself and offered one to our hero, who declined it, nevertheless.

"Now, Bert," began Mr. Morton, "what are you most anxious to see during your stay in Russia?"

"First of all, the coronation of the czar," Bert promptly responded.

"By the way," said Mr. Morton, gravely, "I want to speak to you about that very affair. Do you know, I begin to have an idea that it will be extremely hazardous for us to go to Moscow to witness the spectacles?"

"And why, sir?"

"Because it is generally believed that the nihilists are preparing to take a very active hand in the coronation. It is feared that there will be some move to assassinate the young czar. If that is what they are plotting, then the attempt upon the czar's life is likely to be made either during the railway journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow, or else during the ceremony of crowning the young ruler. Now, don't you see, Alden, that, as no one outside of the highest official authorities will be permitted to know to what train the czar's car is attached, there is danger ahead for every train that travels over the tracks around the date of the czar's journey."

"Then, if you are going to Moscow," suggested Bert, "would it not be safer for you and your party to go at least a week ahead of the time when the czar is expected to make the trip?"

"So far, good," approved Mr. Morton. "That might dispose of the danger of the journey by rail. Yet, if we go to Moscow, I can, through the courtesy of the American ambassador, procure cards that will admit us to the chapel in which the coronation will take place. But the nihilists may plan to blow up that chapel just at the most interesting moment. In such a case, probably very few would escape alive from the chapel."

"But aren't the Russian police equal to stopping the nihilists in time?"

"They can do wonders, I admit. You don't know, Bert, what kind of men the Russian police are."

"Don't I, though!" muttered Bert, grimly, to himself, as his recent experiences at the Third Section rose up before his mind's eye.

"Yes, clever as they are," continued Mr. Morton, "the nihilists are often more clever. But, bless me, my boy, here I am gossiping along in a way to give you a nightmare, and all the while I haven't thought to ask you about your baggage. Where is it? I'll send a man after it at once."

Bert gave him the address of the hotel where he had spent the night before, at which his host opened his eyes.

"As I didn't see you at the depot, I determined to go to a hotel first, and look you up afterward," Bert explained.

Later on, as his host had an engagement, Bert went out to see something more of the city.

After strolling about as much as he cared to on the brilliantly lighted streets, he went into a large, handsome café, where he had one or two cups of real Russian tea.

Finishing these, he arose from the chair to "stretch" his legs.

A full-length mirror was near by.

Bert turned to survey himself in it.

As he did so he experienced a start of surprise.

"Am I seeing double?" he murmured, incredulously.

For, in addition to his own reflection, he saw mirrored there the face and form of another young man, who looked enough like Alden to be his twin brother.

There was an equally puzzled expression on both faces.

Bert turned quickly, and found himself staring at his veritable "double" in the flesh.

Swiftly light dawned upon Alden.

"So," he muttered, "this fellow must be the real Jules Vinard for whom I was mistaken!"

"Your pardon, sir; you have made a mistake."

These words were pronounced by the stranger, in English, and with an almost perfect accent.

In his surprise, Bert had uttered his conjecture just loudly enough to be heard by the other.

And this stranger, this "double" of himself, stood smiling at him with an air of utmost composure.

"I beg your pardon," was Bert's response, given with such good breeding that the other immediately rejoined:

"I infer, sir, from what I heard you say, that you mistook me for an acquaintance. I am sorry that such is not the case. My name is Trenholm, sir—Harry Trenholm, an Englishman. I shall be glad to offer you my card."

The youth who called himself Trenholm thrust one hand into a pocket, produced his cardcase, opened it, and then looked annoyed.

"Confound it," he muttered, "I haven't a card with me, after all."

"I am Albert Alden, of New York," replied the American.

There was an instant's pause, and then lifting his hat courteously, after the continental fashion, Trenholm said:

"I trust we shall have another meeting," and passed on.

Bert soon lost sight of him in the crowd of frequenters of that popular café.

Perhaps twenty minutes passed, when a man touched our hero on the arm.

"For you alone," said the newcomer, handing him a note.



The perfumed envelope was addressed simply, "Monsieur Alden."

Bert broke the seal. On the sheet of paper inclosed, written in a dainty, feminine hand, he read this brief note:

"MY DEAR FRIEND: It is a great favor that I ask, yet one that you can grant without trouble. Come to me at once. Five minutes is all I ask. My servant, who brings this, will show you the way. Your friend, V."

"V." could assuredly be no other than Vera Menikoff, and the impressionable young man thrilled with pleasure that this beautiful creature should style him her dear friend.

Yet, warned, perhaps by some instinct, he hesitated. But only for a moment.

In a short time our hero was walking briskly along the well-lighted street at the side of the man-servant.

Soon they turned into a side street. There was not a soul near them now.

"Mademoiselle is sorry," spoke the servant, "that she is obliged to ask monsieur to see her at the house of a friend, rather than at her own home."

"I do not understand," Bert quickly replied.

"Mademoiselle will explain herself."

"No matter. I am at her service."

Several more street corners were turned. Our hero, unfamiliar with this great city, soon lost track of his whereabouts.

At last his guide led him down a little alleyway, unlocked a gate and conducted him into a yard.

A word of surprise escaped the American.

"Mademoiselle so wishes it," explained the servant.

"That is sufficient."

The guide next unlocked a back door and let them noiselessly into the house.

As soon as they had gone up one flight of stairs the youth saw that he was in a mansion of considerable magnificence in its appointments.

Up one more flight of stairs they went, and then the servant, passing before a door, knocked softly thrice.

The door opened and our hero entered.

Quickly the door closed again, and the other occupant of the room stepped into view from behind it.

Bert could not conceal his start of amazement.

The person who stood confronting him was the youth whom he had met but a short time before in the café.

"Trenholm!" he exclaimed.

The other bowed, and smiled dubiously, yet his air was one of flawless composure and good breeding.

"I trust you will pardon the rather unseemly liberty I have taken," replied the youth who had called himself Trenholm.

"At least," retorted Bert, stiffly, "you will doubtless

have the goodness to immediately explain your rather odd conduct—for I presume it was you who sent that note to me."

"It was, sir."

"Explain, then."

"That is exactly what I am anxious to do, Mr. Alden. Will you not oblige me by taking a seat, in order that we may talk more at our ease?"

"Presently, perhaps," rejoined Alden, with increasing frigidity.

"Now, sir, it is my turn to ask what you mean?"

"Surely, your good sense will tell you," cried Bert. "You have decoyed me here—decoyed is, I think, the proper word?"

"Undoubtedly," murmured the youth who called himself Trenholm.

"Then, sir, since you have decoyed me here, I naturally demand a prompt explanation before I decide whether to remain here more than a moment longer."

An inscrutable smile flitted over the stranger's features.

"Better be seated," he urged, still speaking politely.

"I have already answered you," cried Bert, hotly. "I will keep my feet until I see reason to accept your"—sarcastically—"courtesy."

"So be it, then. I have several questions to ask you."

"Proceed."

"When you first saw me," began the stranger, "you addressed me by a certain name."

"I did."

"It was 'Jules Vinard,' if I mistake not?"

"Yes."

"Why did you mistake me for a person by that name?"

"I decline to answer."

"Was it not because you yourself had some adventure with the secret police? Were you not, Mr. Alden, yourself mistaken for this Jules Vinard?"

Bert did not reply, but the odd light in his eyes answered the question affirmatively.

"Ah!" cried the stranger, gayly, "now we are coming to the point. Mr. Alden—won't you take a seat? No? Please tell me, at once, all about your experiences with the secret police."

"Why do you want to know?"

The stranger only smiled.

"Shall I tell you why you want to know?" demanded Bert, quickly. "Well, then, it is because you want to gain knowledge, at second hand, that you can acquire only through him who was your substitute. It is because you are—Jules Vinard!"

"Even so?" demanded the stranger, imperturbably.

"Then, Monsieur Vinard, I have this to say to you"—the American boy's voice rang out clear and defiant—"if you want to know what business the secret police have



with the real Jules Vinard, you have only to place yourself in their hands and they will quickly enlighten you."

"Bravo!" ejaculated the stranger, though there was a faint sneer in his tone. "Yet do not trifle with me, Mr. Alden. Whether you will be permitted to leave this house again depends wholly upon myself. I am determined that you shall relate the particulars I have demanded."

At mention of the words "determined" and "demanded," Bert's wrath arose.

"So, now, Monsieur Vinard," he mocked, "you are showing yourself the bully? You have singled out the wrong man."

"Bert's 'double' swallowed his own wrath with a palpable effort, and replied, with forced calmness:

"Listen to me, Mr. Alden. What you are able to tell me, it is of the most vital importance that I should know. Why, you may conjecture, if you will. But I repeat that I am determined to force from your lips the information you can give me."

Bert's only answer was a disdainful smile.

"Mr. Alden, your obstinacy will cost you your life."

"So be it," answered the young American, drawing himself up. "Start the fight now, and I'll endeavor to give a creditable account of myself."

Which unexpected defiance made the "double" look keenly at his opponent.

Yet in the American's eyes he read unalterable firmness.

Suddenly the "double" moved a short step forward and let one hand fall, as if in remonstrance, upon our hero's arm.

A terrifying thrill swept like lightning through Alden's frame; his body felt as if paralyzed; though he tried to open his mouth, he could not; no cry came from his lips.

In that brief instant of torture the truth of the situation ran through the boy's mind.

His "double," by some subtle means, was forcing a terrific current of electricity through his body.

For a few moments only could the victim endure this; then death must surely come.

In that same instant the smile vanished from the stranger's face; in its place flashed a scowl of fearful malignity.

"You yourself are to blame!" he hissed, in Bert's ear, pushing him back onto a sofa and bending over him. "It is too late to repent your obstinacy!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE MAD FRENCHMAN'S OTHER VISITOR.

So subtle, yet so powerful, was the current forced through Bert Alden's body that the young American felt his moments to be numbered.

Yet, although his mortal frame stood on the brink of that dissolution which philosophers call death, the sensation of the electric current was not really painful.

As for the young Frenchman, the would-be murderer, the demoniac look had faded from his face.

Now he was the scientist, a fiendish one, to be sure, yet none the less a scientist, absorbed in the fearful experiment of discovering a new way of causing death.

Bert Alden was living what must have been his last full minute of life, when——

A key grated in the latch of the door. The next instant the portal was swung slowly open.

Light as was the sound, the Frenchman heard it. He sprang back from the prostrate figure on the lounge, and a half-uttered oath arose to his lips.

Simultaneously he wheeled about.

The next instant a cry of amazement escaped him.

"You here?" he gasped, half incredulously.

No sooner had the Frenchman relaxed the pressure of his hand upon our hero than Alden felt himself returning to life, all his faculties and strength coming back to him with marvelous quickness.

Unobserved by his would-be murderer, he sat up on the sofa, staring at the same radiant vision that had enraptured the young Frenchman.

For the newcomer was Vera—Vera Menikoff—and though amazement and sternness struggled for the mastery in her face, she appeared to both young men at her loveliest.

"You are an hour earlier than I expected you," murmured the Frenchman.

"And it seems that I am intruding," she remarked, half questioningly, closing the door after her.

"I—I——" stammered the Frenchman.

But at this moment Vera, looking over her shoulder, obtained a full, fair look at our hero.

"Monsieur Alden!" she cried, and now a look of shame crept into her face.

"I have been experimenting upon your American friend," declared the Frenchman, boldly.

"How does he happen to be here?" cried Vera, in a dismayed voice.

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders.

"He came, mademoiselle, at my express invitation."

Bert, meanwhile, had risen to his feet. He stood near the sofa in an attitude full of respect for the young girl. Though his face was ghastly white, it was from determination, not terror.

"Miss Menikoff," he began, slowly, clearly, distinctly. "I am indeed sorry to see that you, too, have been induced to visit this fellow. From my own experience, during the last few moments, I can assure you that he is not a fit person to trust yourself with. I beg, therefore, that you



will permit me to offer you my arm, and grant me the further happiness of escorting you hence to the safety of your father's roof."

"A brave speech!" sneered the Frenchman. "You——"

"Be silent, Jules," commanded Vera, with a stamp of her foot. "Do not interrupt a gentleman when he is speaking."

Though he colored at the implied taunt, Jules Vinard again shrugged his shoulders.

"My good friend," continued Vera, turning to our hero and speaking sadly, "as heartily as I thank you for your gallant offer, I cannot accept it. Why, you must not ask me. Be content to give me your word of honor that you will never, under any temptation, reveal what has taken place here to-night. Promise that—and depart in safety."

"Mademoiselle!" interposed Vinard, furiously.

"Well?" demanded Vera, eying him coldly.

"You are talking nonsense."

"A gallant remark—thank you."

"This Monsieur Alden can never leave here."

"And why not?"

"Because he is already possessed of enough information to ruin us all."

"If he pledges his word he will not betray us."

"And what proof can you offer?"

"His noble conduct toward me at the Third Section."

"A poor proof!"

"I accept it."

"But will our superior, eh?"

Vera recoiled; a troubled look came into her face.

"Ah!" cried Jules, triumphantly, "you realize now how impossible it is to let this meddler escape us. Besides, I had demanded of him that he repeat to me all that took place at the Third Section. He refused. Therefore he shall not escape me."

Vera appeared to deliberate, then she said, tremulously:

"Monsieur Alden, I regret to be obliged to assure you that escape is out of the question. Will you be seated here beside me?"

Bert gravely accepted.

"Jules," continued the girl, without troubling herself to look at the Frenchman, "you are one too many here."

"I am enchanted to obey mademoiselle's commands," he replied, with a light laugh.

An instant later the door closed behind him.

Vera, in whose eyes tears glistened, appeared absorbed in the pattern of the carpet.

"Miss Menikoff," began our hero, impulsively, "there is some horrible mystery here."

"Do not seek to penetrate it," was the sadly given reply.

"But I must, for I must save you."

"You cannot."

"But I must, even from yours<sup>elf</sup>."

"Do not deceive yourself, Monsieur Alden. There is nothing from which I want to be saved."

Her face glowed with sudden animation.

"No, no!" she continued, earnestly. "Do not be deluded, my friend. Though I admit that I am sacrificing myself, I am doing so eagerly, gladly, willingly. I would become a martyr should the glorious chance present itself."

"In what cause?" questioned Bert, bitterly. "Nihilism?"

Even that dreaded name brought no change of color to her face, no gesture of denial from her.

"I have guessed correctly," thought Bert, with a feeling of despairing pity that this beautiful girl could build her ideal amid the fearful doctrines of the brotherhood that worshiped assassination as an ideal.

"So you are a nihilist, Miss Menikoff?" Bert went on, in a hard voice.

"Ask no more questions, for I cannot answer you!" she cried. "Monsieur Alden, after to-night, should your life be spared, our acquaintance must absolutely cease. I will do all that is within human power to save you in remembrance of your noble loyalty and service to me at the Third Section."

"But——"

"Say no more. Ask me nothing, I implore you!"

There was a tap at the door, a key grated in the lock, and then Jules Vinard's mocking face peered into the room.

"Mademoiselle, our superior is here, and the council is waiting. Your presence is requested, and I am also charged to bring our American to hear his fate officially pronounced."

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE BLACK SCEPTER—A RUSSIAN PORTIA.

Having delivered the message, Vinard turned upon his heel and walked away.

"Come," said Vera, rising; "it is a summons that we may not venture to disregard."

"One moment, Miss Menikoff!" pleaded the boy, passionately.

As Vera looked into his eager eyes, she flushed perceptibly.

"Do not let us delay!" she implored. "You will imperil the scanty chance I have of saving you."

Bert opened his mouth to speak, but she stopped him with an imperious gesture.

"We are wasting time," she warned, "and wasting your slight hopes of going from here alive. Hasten. No, no, no! I will not listen to you any further. Follow!"

Bert had no course left but to follow.

Vera, darting out into the hallway, led the way to a flight of stairs.



Upward she ran, never pausing to look behind her, so confident was she that this chivalrous American was at her heels.

Pausing before a door on the next landing, Vera tapped a signal on the panel.

Immediately the door swung open, and a swarthy Russian gave her a swift glance of scrutiny.

"It is well," said the sentinel. "And the prisoner?"

"Here I am," Bert answered for himself.

He was ushered into the room, and the sentinel, placing himself at Alden's side, constituted himself his custodian.

The apartment was spacious and, save for its luxurious appointments, rather resembled a small public hall.

It was filled by a motley assemblage of perhaps forty persons, representing in their dress all grades, from the rich subject to the poor, threadbare student.

Several of those present wore masks. It may be here added, by the writer, that the masked ones were officials who stood so high in the nihilistic fraternity that it was not permitted to the others to know who they were.

"You are in the throne room," growled Bert's captor in his ear. "Advance to the throne and salute the czar."

He was led before a dais, on which stood a massive chair. Both were draped in black.

But it was the man seated on this grewsome mock throne who claimed our hero's attention.

In build and face he was strikingly like the young autocrat of all the Russias.

A closer inspection showed that the "face" was neither more nor less than a cunningly contrived mask, made in imitation of the features of the czar.

And on this mock ruler's head was a crown of black paper.

In his hand he held a huge grotesque scepter, as black as black could be.

"This young czar," announced the guide, in mocking tones, "has planned to go to Moscow, where he will invest himself with the crown and scepter that are supposed to hold eighty millions of slaves in abject obedience. Alas! the only scepter he will ever wield will be the Black Scepter—the Scepter of Death!"

So impressively were the words pronounced that Bert could not repress a shudder.

This, then, this gathering of twoscore people, was the council that was plotting to destroy the young Czar Nicholas.

"Monsieur," said the chief, "you have been conducted before me to hear—well, the sentence of death!"

"I am his accuser," declared Jules Vinard, stepping forward.

The chief's eyes roved from one face to the other.

Frenchman and American were these, the accuser and

accused, yet, had they been twin brothers, the likeness could hardly have been more striking.

A murmur ran around among the onlookers when this fact was realized.

But they had soon greater cause for surprise, for at once Vera Menikoff walked forward, and stood at our hero's side.

"I," she added, "appear for the accused. But let us first hear the complaint."

Jules recited, promptly and briefly, why he had lured Bert Alden into the house, told how he had, though in vain, attempted to force the American to reveal fully what had passed at the office in the Third Section, and narrated how Bert had refused to relate the particulars.

"Why did you so refuse?" demanded the chief, fastening his gaze upon our hero's face.

"Because I am an American," replied Bert.

"But you understand the penalty?"

"Fully."

"And your final answer?"

"The same that I gave to Jules Vinard—that if he wanted to know what dealings the secret police had had with the supposed Vinard, he could probably learn by placing himself in their hands."

A cry of rage went up from several.

"And that is all you will say?" demanded the chief.

"All."

"Then I see no course but to condemn you."

"Is the prosecution through with its case?" questioned Vera, ironically.

"It is," replied the chief, after a glance at the real Vinard, who remained moodily silent.

"Then I will speak for the prisoner," cried Vera.

She stood there, superb and queenly, an eager light shining in her lustre eyes.

She had a debt of gratitude to pay, and now was the time to pay it. Into this effort she would throw all her intensity, all her force of rhetoric—all her great, womanly power.

As Bert Alden gazed at her, like one fascinated, he could not help murmuring to himself:

"Certainly I shall be saved, unless that Russian Portia is pleading to men of stone."

"First of all, sir," began Vera, turning to the bemasked chief, "tell me, sir, whether I am believed to be a loyal member of our organization?"

"You are." The chief's reply was delivered in a tone so deep that it seemed to come up out of his boots.

"Am I implicitly trusted?"

"None more so, mademoiselle."

Bert groaned inwardly. It had now been made plain to him that this fair girl was far more deeply involved in the nihilistic plots than he had before supposed.



"And what I am about to tell you," Vera went on, "will be unquestioningly believed?"

"It will," came in the heavy voice of the chief, "if what you relate is of what you personally know."

Vera then described, with an earnestness that carried conviction of her truthfulness, her first meeting with Bert Alden on that eventful railway journey from Berlin to St. Petersburg, and all that had taken place there.

"I saw at once," she continued, "how closely Monsieur Alden resembled Monsieur Vinard. I felt sure that the police would be on the lookout for Monsieur Vinard."

"Therefore, in a selfish, ungenerous moment, I not only asked Monsieur Alden to change into another railway carriage, but I also urged him, if questioned by any one, to deny that he had ever seen me."

"In a rash, impulsive moment Monsieur Alden gave the promise. He was arrested at the railway station in this city. At the time I escaped. An hour later, as you know, I, too, fell into the hands of the secret police."

Vera then described how nobly the American youth had kept his promise to her.

"We have found a true, good, honest man," Vera resumed, in ringing tones; "shall we, then, denounce ourselves by condemning such a hero?"

"No, no, no!" cried several.

"I say 'yes!'" harshly interjected Jules Vinard. "He stands in the way of the triumph of our cause. Can we, as true brothers, allow any human consideration to endanger our success?"

"What says our chief?" came the quiet query from one of the masked nihilists.

"My decision is," replied the chief of the nihilists, "that Monsieur Alden must die. It is regrettable, and I pronounce the sentence reluctantly. At the same time, I censure Monsieur Vinard for luring Monsieur Alden to this house. Had he not done so, there would be no need to carry out this sentence of death."

"This is a mockery," began Vera, indignantly, but the chief interrupted her.

"Silence!" he commanded, sternly. "I have spoken for the good of our cause, and that must end it. Monsieur Alden, I am sincerely sorry for you. I feel no malice toward you, yet I sentence you to lose your life."

Bert Alden realized that there was no appeal. His ghastly pallor had returned, yet he did not flinch or beg for mercy.

"If I must die," he replied, a trifle huskily, "let it be so. I will not make your task harder by showing the white feather of cowardice."

"Bravely spoken!" cried the chief, warmly.

"Monsieur Alden," cried Vera Menikoff, clutching at his arm and looking imploringly into his face, "assure me that you forgive me for my part in this affair."

"There is nothing for which I reproach you," answered Bert, magnanimously, "not even for sending the letter which decoyed me here."

"The letter?" asked Vera, in bewilderment.

"I will explain that," laughed Vinard, recklessly. "I wrote that letter, Monsieur Alden, and signed 'V' to it. Frankly, I knew that you would suppose Mademoiselle Menikoff to be the author of it."

"Forger!" cried Vera, flashing a look of terrible scorn at the Frenchman.

"Silence!" commanded the chief. "Who wrote the letter makes no difference. Our sentence must be carried out."

"Flee! flee!" shouted a man, rushing into the room. "The police, in great force, have surrounded the house!" Instantly all was consternation.

"Listen!" cried the bearer of ill tidings. "There, do you hear what a clatter they are making on the door? Thanks to its construction, it will hold for a few moments. There is time to escape."

"Yes, yes, we must escape," pronounced the chief. "Follow me, and I will lead you all to safety. But be as silent as the grave!"

An instant later the chief added:

"Monsieur Alden, congratulate yourself. Since the police have discovered this retreat of ours, there is no need to kill you, for you could not betray what is already known."

The rattle and clatter of blows falling on the street door could be heard all through the house.

Silently, and with perfect discipline, the nihilists made their way from the room.

Long ere the door was forced in below there was no sign or sound of the nihilists.

"Now the door is down; in, my men!" commanded a voice from the vestibule. "Spread through the house; let not one escape! Jules Vinard, we call upon you and your accomplices to surrender!"

"I am out of the frying pan, but I have fallen into the fire!" grimly commented Bert Alden, striding across the room. "Let them find me here, and my fatal resemblance to Jules Vinard will do the rest!"

## CHAPTER X.

### A BATTLE OF WITS.

Even if the thought of flight had occurred to Bert Alden, he must instantly have realized the folly of it.

So swiftly did the St. Petersburg police spread themselves through the house that not many seconds had elapsed before several of their number were in each room.

"Here is one of the dogs!" roared a stalwart policeman.



There were a dozen policemen in the apartment by this time, and at their head was Monsieur Petroffski, that trusted aid of Monsieur Jabowsky.

He now strode up to our hero, and began, sternly:

"Where are the rest of your accomplices, Jules Vinard?"

"I have none," said Bert, speaking as nonchalantly as he could. "If you mean to ask where the nihilists are, they have just made their escape."

"And you stayed behind to dare us?" cried Petroffski, incredulously.

Then he stared very hard at our hero, with the result that the detective became convinced that he who stood before him was not Jules Vinard, but the young American who had once before been arrested by mistake.

So he stepped very close to our hero, and whispered:

"Step aside, if you please, until our men have finished searching this room."

Bert very willingly complied.

In three minutes the policemen were satisfied that they had left no possible hiding place or means of escape uninvestigated.

One of their number so reported.

"Withdraw, then," requested Monsieur Petroffski.

"Two of you stand outside of the door. The remainder aid your comrades in other parts of the house."

The policemen quickly dispersed themselves.

"Come over here and sit down," then desired the detective, speaking rather amiably.

Bert complied.

"Monsieur, I recognize you."

"You have seen me before?" questioned Bert.

Evading this question, Petroffski went on:

"You are Monsieur Alden, an American."

"You have spoken truly."

"And you were once arrested on account of your striking resemblance to a French anarchist, Jules Vinard."

"That is correctly stated."

"But you are not a nihilist?"

"Decidedly not."

"Then how is it that we find you here at their very headquarters?"

Monsieur Petroffski fired this question point-blank, in a terrible voice, and glared at our hero as if he expected to see the American covered with confusion.

"It is very easily explained," retorted Bert, coolly. "It was that fatal resemblance that has again gotten me into trouble."

"Were the nihilists here at the time we began to batter down the door?" asked Petroffski.

"Yes; holding a council in this very room."

Monsieur Petroffski turned pale.

"Monsieur Alden," he gasped, "were they holding an important meeting?"

"A very important one."

"And what business were they transacting?"

"They had just sentenced me to death!"

The detective started, then gazed piercingly into the eyes of this very cool American.

"You make extraordinary statements, monsieur, with great *sang-froid*."

"Believe me," smiled Bert, "that I am not ungrateful to you for coming here just in the nick of time to prevent those scoundrels from carrying out the sentence they had imposed upon me."

"Which way did they go in escaping?"

"They went out of this room; I did not hear them on any other floor; that is all I know."

"I thank you, Monsieur Alden," said the police agent, "and do not blame you that what you have told me does not lead to better results on our part. Well, we have missed the dogs, and nothing remains but to leave a party of police in possession here."

"And you have finished with me?" inquired Bert, hopefully.

"All except one little formality."

"And that is——"

"I must request you to visit Monsieur Jabowsky, and repeat to him the interesting details that you have furnished me."

"And, as soon as I have seen this chief of yours, I shall be free to go where my own desires lead me?"

"Assuredly."

Though this promise was given without a sign of hesitation, the young American was not deceived.

"Take me to Monsieur Jabowsky, then, as soon as you please," desired Bert, rising and speaking as calmly as he could.

"Nothing is easier, monsieur. My own carriage is waiting outside."

It was not a long ride that followed, and, at its end, the police agent remarked:

"Here we are, monsieur, at one of the doors of the Third Section."

When Monsieur Jabowsky and Bert Alden met, one was as calm and imperturbable as the other.

Both of these principal actors were playing parts. It was to be a battle of wits!

While Petroffski was delivering his report, Monsieur Jabowski calmly consumed the remainder of his cigar.

"And what have you to say to all this?" questioned Monsieur Jabowsky, when his subordinate had finished.

"Only that I have told the truth," was Bert's answer.

"Never have I heard a lie told here," was the sneering retort.

"Then I congratulate you, sir."



"He is hiding something," instantly concluded the police agent.

Then followed a cross-examination, swift, searching, pitiless, but our hero came out of it unscathed.

"By the way," remarked the police agent, quietly, "you have forgotten to tell me about the part played in your night's adventure by your delightful female acquaintance—the one whom I showed you here the other day."

"You must be more explicit, sir."

"Must?" echoed Jabowsky, wrathfully. "Monsieur Alden, do you not understand that that is a word that can be used in Russia by only——"

"The czar," finished our hero, with admirable impudence. "You are right, sir, and I thank you."

In vain were all further efforts to force the American to remember the name of Vera Menikoff, and, though the police agent persisted for some minutes, he was obliged to admit himself unsuccessful.

Just at the moment when the youth least expected it, the police agent sarcastically continued:

"Monsieur, I congratulate you upon your skill at verbal fencing—or else upon your innocence. You are at liberty."

"Then I thank you, and—good-night, sir!"

"Plucky to the last," snapped Jabowsky to himself; and aloud he added:

"Monsieur Petroffski will show you to the door, since I am fatigued."

Jabowski's underling, after one rapid glance at his chief, obeyed, and Bert Alden, too delighted to believe his own senses for a moment, found himself hastening away from the fearful building which thousands had entered to emerge no more.

## CHAPTER XI.

### TRAPPED!

"See here, my lad, where have you been?"

This was the question which Mr. Morton hurled at the head of his young guest the very moment that they were closeted in the privacy of the library.

"Viewing public buildings, sir."

"Come, come, young man, no nonsense!"

"Well, then, I have been taking a walk through the Third Section."

The first thing that Mr. Morton did was to turn pale; next, he tiptoed over to the door and turned the key in the lock.

Then he returned and said, simply:

"Now tell me the truth—the whole truth, mind you."

"In strict confidence?"

"That is as I see fit."

"Then I am sorry; I can tell you so little of the truth that I had better not begin."

Yet, by dint of combined persuasion and promises, the elder man did succeed in extracting Bert's story, and without the slightest reservation at that.

Two or three times the listener found it necessary to interpose this whispered caution:

"Speak lower! Should one of my servants overhear you it is likely that daylight would see both of us riding in closed carriages, bound to lifelong exile in Siberia—by order of the czar!"

"Now, you have heard the whole story, sir," finished our hero, at the end of his relation. "What do you advise?"

Mr. Morton glanced at his watch.

"It is four o'clock in the morning," was that gentleman's answer. "That means that we have less than four hours left for sleep. Therefore you must rise at the instant that I knock upon your door."

"And then?"

"We shall have two hours in which to rise, breakfast and present ourselves at the residence of the United States ambassador."

"For what purpose, sir?"

"In order that you may tell him all that you told me." Bert winced.

"That is impossible," he protested.

"And why?"

"It would be necessary, in that case, to make statements that might destroy Miss Menikoff."

Morton shrugged his shoulders.

"She is a criminal," he replied.

"And I would be, in my own estimation, sir, if I betrayed her confidence."

"But consider your own safety."

"I do, sir, and I remember how hard she fought to save my life."

"Then, if it came to a question between your own life and that of this precious young Russian——"

"In that case I could not but feel," came the unhesitating rejoinder, "that I ought to be glad to prove that American courage is up to the standard of Russian."

"By the great Washington, I believe you are right!" cried Mr. Morton, bending forward and pressing the boy's hand. "Bert, I've known a great many different kinds of men in my time, yet not one of them would I trust who forgot his obligations or his word of honor."

"Then your latest advice——"

"Is to hold your tongue."

"And what about the American ambassador?"

Again Mr. Morton shrugged his shoulders.

"Bert, I had an idea that you might save yourself by going to him and telling him all that you have told me. Yet he would feel bound to repeat your story to the Russian authorities, and then your pledge to Miss Menikoff



would be broken. Let us drop the matter. Come, it is time for us to retire."

As day after day slipped by, and the time lengthened into a fortnight, our young American gave less and less thought to the nihilists among whom he had experienced such startling adventures.

If he thought of them at all, Alden was tempted to murmur:

"That was all a dream. It never happened."

And then, when forced to admit that the experiences of the past were very far from constituting a dream, he added:

"No matter; I have heard the last of them. Even Monsieur Jabowsky has forgotten that I ever existed."

The middle of the month of May was approaching.

Very soon, now, it would be time for the Americans gathered in Russia's northern capital to undertake the railway journey to Moscow.

Every day brought the coronation of the czar and czarina nearer and nearer.

In company with a few other Americans, Mr. Morton and his boyish guest were to journey to the Holy City of the Russian empire. Arrived there, the whole party of Americans were to occupy apartments at the same hotel. They would attend the ceremonies at the Kremlin together, and share many other pleasures that were to follow. Life, for a few days, was to be devoted to a round of gayety the like of which is not to be seen outside of Russia, and even there only a few times during a century.

Full of these anticipations, Bert was walking down the Prospekt one morning.

By chance he passed the barracks of the hussar regiment to which Lieut Souvieski belonged. At the same time it occurred to Alden that he had never accepted the invitation to lunch which that officer had extended him.

"It isn't too late now," reflected Bert, "if I can find Souvieski."

He passed two sentinels without great difficulty, and was rejoiced to find Souvieski.

His late duelling opponent hailed him with delight, and introduced the American to several brother officers.

Bert lunched at mess as Souvieski's guest, and was surrounded by as jolly and companionable a set of young officers as ever drew sword.

Souvieski made himself especially agreeable.

"Are you going to Moscow?" he asked of our hero.

"Yes."

"And so am I. We have got word that our regiment is to be assigned there. But come out onto our parade ground. I want you to see how a battalion of real Russian soldiers can drill."

There were many other scenes in barracks' life that Sou-

vieski wanted to show his guest, and between them all our hero was detained there until after dark.

At last he succeeded in getting away from his cordial host.

"Come again after you return from Moscow," begged the lieutenant. "And now let me try to borrow a carriage to send you home in."

But Bert declined this latter offer, and, a short distance away from the barracks, found a public carriage.

It was a closed affair, and Alden, as soon as the vehicle was in motion, leaned back and, oblivious to all else, reviewed all the happenings of the forenoon.

After a while he leaned forward and took a look out of the carriage window.

As he did so he uttered a low cry of astonishment.

Instead of being in a thoroughfare lined with private residences, the carriage was crossing a square, and going directly toward a brilliantly lighted public building.

"The depot of the railway to Moscow!" gasped Bert.

A suspicion of treachery flashed into his mind.

He attempted to spring from the carriage, only to find that he could not.

He was helpless, unable to move. Even his tongue seemed paralyzed. Through his body coursed a current of electricity such as he had felt but once before in his life.

Then he knew that Jules Vinard was at the bottom of this strange, terrifying experience!

Trembling, helpless, speechless!

Overpowered by that dread, subtle electric current, which he had once before felt, Bert Alden crouched down upon the seat of the carriage.

Sight and hearing seemed the only faculties left to him.

Slowly the seat in front of him began to rise, and a head appeared from under it.

Then the seat shot suddenly up, and the man who had been hiding under it came forth from his place of concealment.

It was the young Frenchman, Jules Vinard.

Taking one satisfied look at his wholly helpless victim, Vinard lowered the front seat and sat upon it.

Mockery was written in every lineament of the Frenchman's face.

Calmly he drew from one of his pockets a false mustache, and adjusted it to his upper lip with the precision and skill of one accustomed to such masquerades.

Next he covered his eyes with a pair of blue goggles, and, after one or two more swift changes, no acquaintance would have recognized this transformed young man as Jules Vinard.

"*Bon jour, monsieur!*" he cried, gayly.

Bert's eyes expressed a loathing which his nerveless lips could not utter.

"You must realize, monsieur," taunted the nihilist,



"that you are worse than helpless. You must do as I want you to. for you cannot save yourself. Come, here we are. Do not attempt to trick me, for you will find that you cannot. Be good enough to remember that you are merely my puppet."

The carriage had drawn up at one of the side doors of the railway station.

Standing in the doorway was a uniformed policeman.

As soon as he beheld this cheering sight, hope revived in Alden's breast. He would appeal to the officer—with his eyes, if the electric current did not permit him to speak.

"Come," urged Vinard, with mocking solicitude, "wake up, my dear friend. Here we are at the depot. Come, you must not allow so little wine to go to your head. Here, lean upon me."

For Bert's project of appealing to the policeman had been defeated by an even stronger application of the current.

His head swam and his eyes seemed trying to close themselves, despite his most vigorous efforts to keep them open.

Reeling dizzily, he was forced to clutch at the Frenchman's arm for support.

Nevertheless, Vinard contrived to help him to walk; perhaps it would be more truthful to say that the nihilist dragged him.

The policeman eyed them both sharply.

"What is the matter with your young friend?" he demanded.

"Oh, nothing, except that he drank rather too much wine at his dinner. A very little goes to his head."

"And into his legs," grinned the policeman. "Where are you taking him?"

"Home," and Vinard named a village almost as far distant as Moscow itself.

"Then you must hurry," cautioned the policeman. "The last train to-night departs in less than sixty seconds."

Now Bert made frantic efforts to free himself from the strange thralldom that possessed him.

But speech failed him. Try as he would, he could not even open his eyes.

Was it mesmerism, he wondered—this inexplicable power which Vinard exercised? Yet it could hardly be that, for, weak and incapable as the electric current held ~~the~~ flesh, his will, had it depended upon that alone, was strong to throw off the other's power.

Despite himself, he was half dragged, half led, at a rapid gait down the depot to the office of the ticket seller.

Arrived at the little window of the ticket seller, Vinard had a pair of passports—forged, they must have been—ready at hand.

"Give me two tickets, first-class, for ——" he desired,

naming the same village he had mentioned to the policeman at the door.

Hardly glancing at the passports, so little time was there to spare, the ticket seller accepted Vinard's money and thrust out the tickets.

"Come, my dear friend," urged the hypocritical Vinard, in the kindest tone he could muster.

And Bert was dragged down the platform to the waiting train, one of the good-natured train guards assisting by waving his hand for a moment's delay to the official in charge of the train.

Not once, however, did Jules let go his hold on Bert's arm. Had he done so our hero would have shook himself free of that baneful, mysterious power that was leading him to his ruin.

"A compartment all to ourselves, if you please," desired Vinard, bestowing with his free hand a silver coin upon the guard.

"Certainly; here you are, your excellency. By St. Ivan, your friend must have swallowed two bottles of wine at a single gulp," grinned the guard.

They were inside one of the compartments of a first-class coach, the door was closed after them, and immediately the train began to move.

## CHAPTER XII.

TOM UNGER, OF CHICAGO.

"Whew!" gasped Vinard, forcing our helpless hero onto one of the seats and using his handkerchief upon his face with the hand that was disengaged. "That was a narrow escape, *mon ami*, but here we are, safe from interruption—and now you must listen to me. It is I who shall speak, and you who shall listen and obey. Now I will give you a little breathing spell, but you must not attempt to summon any one. In the first place, you would not be heard above the noise of the moving train; in the second place, if I became suddenly excited, I might apply the current so hard that your life would end—snap!"

Vinard did not take his hand from Jack's arm, but the current was not now nearly so strong—in fact, only powerful enough to serve as a reminder that it still existed.

"What do you mean by this?" panted Jack, gazing straight into his oppressor's eyes. "Are you seeking revenge?"

"Perish so unworthy a thought," laughed Vinard, gayly. "No, no, my dear friend, what I am doing is solely for the good of the cause that I represent. You must know, Monsieur Alden, that one who knows as much about our order as you do is not a person whom it is well for us to have at large."

"You don't leave people in much doubt about what you mean to do with them," replied Bert. "What is to be my fate—death?"



"Only as an alternative," promptly replied Jules. "If you wish to live, there is one way in which you can preserve your life."

"And that is——"

"To join our order—to become one of us."

"Enough!" broke in Bert, making an heroic effort to control his shaking voice. "Much as I would like to live, the prospect that you offer me is worse than death."

"Very well, my good friend."

The current that now tingled through Bert's body had reached again its former intensity. He was as helpless as before.

"Do not imagine, though, that you are to die from electrocution," continued Vinard. "It would then be said that you had suffered from a weak heart or apoplexy, and thus a valuable object lesson would be sacrificed. Here"—whipping a card from his pocket—"can you read this?"

A jumble of characters printed in the Slavonic alphabet danced before the young American's eyes.

"You cannot read it; the letters are unfamiliar to you," went on Vinard. "Permit me to translate for you. In English it would read:

"He died the death of a traitor to the people!"

"So you will understand," gloated the nihilist, "that when your body is found, with this card attached to the hilt of the dagger that I shall drive through your heart, our oppressors will tremble. They will read in it another defiance which they are powerless to punish."

He raised the keen-pointed blade with a swiftness that resembled lightning.

Even at the second that the stiletto hung poised aloft the door of the coach was wrenched open.

A man stood out there, on the narrow platform of the train whirling through space, and greeted the scene that met his gaze with a yell of amazement.

Uttering a cry of dismay, Vinard sprang back.

At the very second that he felt himself released from the clutch of that overwhelming current, Bert Alden rose up and dashed at his enemy.

Too late! Jules Vinard was already locked in a fierce embrace with the opportune intruder.

Out into the night air swung the combatants, balancing, for a brief instant, on the narrow, dizzy ledge of a side platform.

Then a fearful shriek came to the young American's ears.

"I'm afraid he's done for! Good job if he is, though!" cried the stranger, swinging himself in through the door of the coach and pulling it closed after him.

The man spoke in English. He was a tall, stalwart-looking young fellow, with a pleasant face and hearty manner.

"Glad I was able to be of service," he added, as a sud-

den sway of the train threw him upon the seat beside Bert Alden.

"Don't think, though," he added, quickly, "that I feel no thrill of compunction for the poor devil that I was compelled to throw from a train moving as quickly as this one is. Yet I'm glad that I got here in time to toss off the right one."

Now Alden recovered his breath and his self-possession.

"I don't know who you are——" he began.

"Oh, that's all right. I'm Tom Unger, at your service—Tom Unger, of Chicago, U. S. A."

"—yet I thank you, with all my heart, for your splendid, courageous service to me."

"Oh, that was nothing," retorted Mr. Unger, with good-humored modesty. "By George, though, I'm afraid the fall from the train must have killed that scoundrel!"

"Wouldn't it be better to pull the cord and stop the train?" ventured Bert.

"What's the use?" rejoined Mr. Unger. "If you know what Russian trainmen are, you must be aware that they would only shrug their shoulders, say that it served the ~~r~~cal right, and say it in a way that would mildly rebuke you for presuming to halt an imperial mail train. We'll tell the guard about it at the first stop, and that'll be soon enough, I warrant you. Was that fellow trying to rob and murder you? Foolish question to ask, though. I saw for myself what was up."

And Bert Alden, to use an expressive Americanism, was content to "let it go at that."

"Strange what odd impulses a fellow sometimes gets into his head!" continued the loquacious Unger, musingly. "I was sitting all alone in one of the coaches back of this, when I felt a sudden and unaccountable impulse to try the door of the coach. I found it unlocked—an unusual thing, as you are doubtless aware, on a European railway coach. As soon as I discovered it I felt a reckless longing to step out on the side platform. Now, it takes quite an acrobat to balance himself on the narrow platform when the train is going thirty miles an hour or faster, yet I felt as if I simply had to do it. I got along as far as this door, and what I saw going on inside very nearly took my breath away. I tried the door, and, to my astonishment, I found this one unlocked, too. Then—but—well, you know the rest that followed. Odd, wasn't it?"

"Very," rejoined Bert, with a dry smile, "and also very fortunate—for me."

Bert introduced himself, and a right pleasant traveling companion he had from then on.

Unger informed our hero that, though an American, he was of German descent.

He was bound for Moscow to see as much as possible of the coronation ceremonies.

Bert quickly decided, upon learning that he could not



get back to St. Petersburg before some time the following morning, to keep on to Moscow, and to telegraph Mr. Morton of his safe arrival there.

"Mighty glad to have a fellow-countryman go through with me," declared Unger, when he learned of our hero's decision. "We can knock around Moscow together, and have some good times for a day or two, until your friends get here."

Bert gladly accepted this proposition. The more he saw of Tom Unger the more he liked the talkative, active, good-natured Chicagoan.

At the first stop the train made the guard came along and asked to see their tickets.

Tom promptly produced his. Bert suddenly recollected that his ticket had been in the possession of Jules Vinard.

"So the robber got away with yours, eh?" questioned Unger.

"Yes," answered Bert.

"The robber?" cried the guard, questioningly. Then, suddenly recollecting Bert and Jules, he asked:

"So, your excellency, that fellow who escorted you was doing it for the purpose of robbing you?"

"Yes," answered Alden, evasively.

"And where is he now?"

"Back up the track," interposed Unger, grimly. "He was trying to murder this young man when I interfered. In the struggle that followed I was compelled to throw him from the train."

"So much the better," retorted the guard, "if there is one robber the less in the world. However, the matter must be reported to the police. In order not to delay your excellencies, I will have word telegraphed ahead to the next station, that the police may meet you there and take your depositions. I do not believe it will be necessary for your excellencies to be delayed in your journey."

"Will you have the kindness to get me a ticket for Moscow?" asked Bert, producing his own passport.

"Certainly," assented the guard.

"If that murderous rascal got your money," volunteered Tom Unger, "I shall be delighted to loan you enough for your ticket."

"No, though I thank you; I have sufficient money."

The guard departed on a run, coming back with ticket and passport, just before the train started again.

At the second stop of the train, which was made an hour after the first, two police officials interrogated Bert and Unger regarding the "robber."

Not a very bright pair of officials did they prove to be. They made notes of what Bert and Tom told them, and then asked:

"Monsieur Alden, do you know the name of that scoundrel?"

"No," responded Bert, adding, to himself:

"After all, that is true, since 'Jules Vinard' is unquestionably an alias."

"You did the empire a good service in throwing the scoundrel from the train," said one of the officials to Unger. "Let us hope that he has been placed beyond the possibility of doing any more harm. Good-night."

The train resumed its journey. Not until late the next forenoon did it reach the ancient holy city and second capital of Russia, Moscow.

The city was in the throes of preparation for the great event it was soon to witness. On every hand were monster decorations; at a moment's notice, at night, the city was able to burst out into a radiant glory of illumination. People representing a hundred different principalities, races and tribes, all under the rule of the Great White Czar, thronged the streets, an eager, expectant multitude. Everywhere troops were on the march through the streets.

"It's a dozen Fourths of July rolled into one," Tom Unger enthusiastically declared.

Bert remembered the name of the hotel at which Mr. Morton had engaged rooms in advance for his party, and they were driven there.

Crowded as the place was, Unger managed to secure a room also.

Alden telegraphed Mr. Morton, at St. Petersburg, and then the young men started out to see the sights and excitement with which the great city teemed.

On the next day Mr. Morton reached Moscow.

That gentleman heard what Bert told him concerning his latest adventure with Jules Vinard.

"Unger is just the companion you need, if you are resolved to continue getting into scrapes," said Mr. Morton. "I must see him at once, and thank him for his goodness to you."

Tom quickly became a favorite with the Mortons.

"To-morrow, by the way," said Mr. Morton to the young men, two days later, "the czar and czarina, and the whole imperial party, will reach this city. There will be a crowd of thousands at the Smolensky Station, but only those having tickets will be admitted to the station. Bert, my boy, I am fortunate enough to have two tickets. You and I will go; but there promises to be such a fearful crush that the ladies will save themselves for some of the bigger events to come."

"Are you going to be there?" asked Bert, turning to Tom.

"I'd give a good deal to," replied Tom, his disappointment showing very plainly; "but, unfortunately, I have no one to introduce me to the American ambassador, so I'm afraid there isn't one chance in a million of my getting a ticket."

"Give yourself no uneasiness," rejoined Mr. Morton,



heartily. "I happen to know the ambassador very well, and I feel quite sure of being able to get another ticket."

Which he succeeded in doing, whereat Tom Unger's joy hardly knew bounds.

And Bert Alden, who had a vague presentiment that he had not heard the last of the nihilists, was glad, too, that he was to have the companionship of this energetic, reliable new friend.

### CHAPTER XIII.

#### A DUTY MADE MEDDLER.

That evening, when walking about the streets, Bert ran into Souvieski. The meeting between the two young men was cordial in the extreme.

"Monsier Alden, my friend!" he cried.

"Souvieski?" murmured Bert, delightedly, yet bewilderedly.

"Yes, at your service. My regiment has been detailed here at Moscow for the next few days."

They went to a café and sat down at one of the tables. After they had given their order, Souvieski said, confidentially:

"Do you know, Monsieur Alden, that at one time I would not have been so glad to see you?"

"When we fought our duel?" questioned Bert, smiling.

"No; at the time when I first learned that you were acquainted with Mademoiselle Vera Menikoff, and that she highly esteemed you. I was jealous of you."

"I am not one of Mademoiselle Menikoff's suitors," replied Bert, quietly.

"But that remark means no disparagement of her?"

"On the contrary, she is a charming young lady."

"I am glad to hear you say that, my friend."

"And why?"

"Because, my friend, I hope soon to lead Mademoiselle Vera to the altar. She has as good as given me her promise. But why," cried the lieutenant, suddenly, bringing his fist down upon the table, "do you look so strange over that news?"

"Do I look strange?" asked Bert, struggling to conceal his embarrassment. "I admit that I was surprised."

"And why?" Souvieski wanted to know. "Do you think that Mademoiselle Menikoff is a fool to accept me?"

"By no means," protested Bert. "The young lady has shown uncommonly good judgment."

"Ah! I understand," cried Souvieski, suddenly. "Despite your disclaimer, you are hard hit in that direction yourself—eh, Monsieur Alden? I am sorry to be your successful rival—confound it! no, I'm not sorry, either, but you comprehend what I would say, my friend."

"I assure you," declared Bert, "that I am not in love with Miss Menikoff, though I esteem her so highly that I must congratulate you most heartily."

"Your hand!" cried the hussar, proudly, and their fingers closed in a cordial clasp.

At the same time Alden was doing some lightning-like thinking.

"Vera Menikoff in love with this big, honest lieutenant?" he ruminated. "Impossible! She is too thoroughly a nihilist to allow herself any affection for a young officer who is aggressively loyal to his czar.

"Why, then, does she accept his devotion? It can be for no other reason than that she means to use him as an innocent tool to further the plots of the nihilists. That she will ruin this big, honest, simple-minded fellow does not trouble her in the least. 'No matter who suffers, provided we triumph!' that is the motto of those political fanatics.

"And poor Souvieski! He believes that this girl, with only one idol—nihilism—loves him. He will learn his mistake only after he has been unconsciously used against his ruler. Heavens! he would be indignant enough to kill her, did he suspect the truth!"

For one moment Alden debated whether he should frankly warn the lieutenant.

"No, no! It would be worse than folly," he decided. "Were I to breathe a word to him against his sweetheart, he would promptly knock my head off my shoulders—he would be no man if he didn't."

On top of this conclusion came another.

"I will interfere and save the lieutenant!" he cried, inwardly. "But I will go to headquarters—I'll see Vera Menikoff herself."

So he asked:

"Is Mademoiselle Menikoff in Moscow at present?"

"Yes. She and her father are living in a small furnished house which they have hired for this week."

"Will you favor me with her address?"

"Why do you want it?" insisted Souvieski, a dark, suspicious look crossing his face. "But no matter, my friend, since I am her accepted suitor."

And the lieutenant repeated the address.

"But I am dawdling here," added the lieutenant, "when I should be at my post of duty at the governor-general's residence."

Together they left the café.

"*Au revoir*, my friend," cried the hussar. "I do not say good-by, for I have a presentiment that we shall meet again."

After watching the lieutenant stride away Bert hunted until he found a carriage—not an easy task on this day, when all Moscow was out witnessing the extraordinary pageant attendant upon the czar's official entry into the holy city.

At last, however, our hero found a driver and vehicle. In twenty minutes he reached the address given him by Souvieski and sounded the bell.

The door was opened by a man-servant, and Bert inquired if he was fortunate enough to find the young lady at home.

"Your excellency's name?" demanded the servant.

"Monsieur Alden."

To his great surprise, Vera was at home, and a few minutes later she darted into the room into which the American had been ushered.



"This is delightful of you, Monsieur Alden," cried the girl, giving him her hand and greeting him in a manner as unconstrained as if she believed his call to be purely a social one. "I must consider it a very graceful compliment, sir, that you come here at an hour when every one else has eyes only for the great pageants that are to be seen this afternoon."

"Apparently," said Bert, "the sights have no charm for you, either."

"But you have not told me how you learned our address."

"Lieut. Souvieski favored me with it."

"Souvieski?" repeated Vera, and then, looking at Bert, she divined at once the object of his visit.

"Your call, then, related to him?" she asked, quickly.

"You have guessed it, mademoiselle."

"Proceed, sir."

"Mademoiselle, have I gained the right, by any past services which I may have been fortunate enough to render you, to speak bluntly?"

"Your question has a disagreeable ring to it," pouted Vera. "Nevertheless, speak."

"Mademoiselle, Souvieski—good, honest fellow that he is—is now in the seventh heaven of happiness."

"Because I have accepted his love?" queried Vera, blushing.

"Yes; and now, my blunt question. Is he aware that you are a nihilist?"

"Of course not."

"Do you think it would make any difference if he were?"

"If he were sure of it," shuddered Vera, "he might even kill me—so intense is his foolish, fantastic devotion to our tyrant, the czar."

"And now, mademoiselle, another question as blunt as the other. Do you love Souvieski?"

"Monsieur, you are going too far!"

"I fear so," Bert replied, sadly, "but Souvieski is my friend. If he is in any danger I would save him. Now, mademoiselle, if you would pardon my presumption, and would give me your word of honor that you do not intend to use the lieutenant as an unconscious tool for the nihilists, you would make me feel much easier."

"And what if I cannot give you that assurance—since I would scorn to lie to you?" demanded the girl, regarding him intently.

"Mademoiselle," exclaimed Bert, "you have devoted your life to a 'cause' that exacts all from its devotees, yet does that give you any right to bring ruin to a manly young fellow who, because he loves you, may be blind enough to be led into breaking his oath of allegiance to his emperor?"

And Bert launched into an eloquent appeal, to which Vera listened without a trace of resentment, though she replied to all his arguments with a skill that baffled him.

"I have failed, then," sighed Alden, rising.

"But I may still count upon you to be my friend?" she asked, offering him her hand and giving him such an entrancing look as might once upon a time have turned his head.

But her fascinations failed to prevail upon him now. He could only look upon her as a dangerous siren.

Re-entering the carriage, he was driven back to the hotel in a most uncomfortable frame of mind. He had tried to save Souvieski, and had failed, and the only way left to him of doing it would be to denounce Mademoiselle Menikoff to the police. That would be impossible, for our hero could not forget that she, too, had once saved his life.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### "UNHAPPY SOUVIESKI!"

On the next morning Bert went out for another walk.

He was nearing a little chapel that fronted on one of the streets when he was halted by a procession that had just reached the door of the edifice.

An awning was spread from the door to the edge of the sidewalk, and there were other indications of a wedding in prospect.

From the foremost carriages alighted the bridegroom and his party. Nearly all were in full dress military uniforms, there being only a sprinkling of civilian attire in the party.

But the proudest and happiest-looking man of them all was Count and Lieut. Souvieski.

By some chance that officer looked over, perceived our hero, and made straight for him, lifting his hat as he came.

"So you are to be present, Monsieur Alden?" he cried, cordially. "I feared that other distractions might keep you away."

"What is on the cards?" queried Bert, in embarrassment.

"Why, my wedding, of course," laughed the happy hussar.

"Why, certainly. Don't pretend that you had forgotten it."

"I never knew it—at least, not that it was set for to-day."

"Do you mean that you did not receive an invitation?"

"Assuredly I did not."

"That is strange."

"Was one sent?"

"Most certainly. Mademoiselle Menikoff attended to it herself."

"I did not receive it," replied Bert, feeling more uncomfortable than before.

"But you are here, Monsieur Alden, so it is not necessary that you should receive one. You will, of course, come in."

Bert assented, wondering greatly, for, after they passed into the chapel, Souvieski said, smiling:

"You must have thought me in a hurry. It was very suddenly arranged, much to my delight. I do not object to telling you, in confidence, why I was so fortunate as to be able to hurry matters. You see, Mademoiselle Menikoff, like all others of her sex in Russia, was eager to attend the coronation three days hence. It was impossible for her father to procure for her a ticket of admission to the Cathedral of the Assumption, and she was in despair at the thought of being compelled to be absent."

"So I represented to Mademoiselle Menikoff that, as the wife of Count Souvieski, and because I have been for-



fortunate enough to secure very favorable recognition at court, she would be able to attend. You see, Monsieur Alden, that there are others besides our blessed czar who are to be made happier through that same coronation."

Souvieski went away.

Now the meaning of the whole affair was quite clear to our hero—far more clear than it was to the happy, deluded hussar.

"Good heavens!" muttered Bert, between his clinched teeth. "So that is the reason for Mademoiselle Vera's tactics. She has taken this means to attend the coronation—because she is the nihilist chosen to assassinate the czar! She it is who hopes to send him to that other world over which the black scepter holds sway!"

Then, a moment later!

"Unhappy Souvieski! Poor, bewitched fool! He is about to become the husband of the woman whom, in three days, whatever her degrees of success, he will loathe worse than the reptiles that crawl!"

The bridegroom and his party now took up their positions before the priest, who stood waiting.

There was no delay, for immediately after Vera entered the chapel, leaning on her father's arm.

There were over three hundred spectators present now, most of them friends of the bridegroom.

Slowly the marriage service of the Russian Church proceeded.

Vera, calm and self-possessed, appeared the least concerned of any of those present.

Finally the ceremony was over. The bridal party filed out of the chapel. Then the guests and spectators followed.

Arrived at the hotel, Bert Alden went to his room.

In a state of fearful agitation, he paced up and down the apartment, muttering:

"What a fearful position I am placed in! Either I must give a young woman over to torment—and perhaps death—and break gallant Souvieski's heart—or else I must remain silent and let these infernal nihilists go ahead with their plot of assassination. In that case, too, Souvieski's heart would be likely to break, for I believe him to be more loyal to his imperial master than to any one else on earth."

And our hero's next tragic reflection was:

"If I do not take this course of denouncing Vera and her associates to the police, and anything happens to the czar, will I not be, through my neglect, as guilty a regicide as any one of them?"

Both phases of the question were so revolting to him that an hour's cogitation failed to bring him any nearer to a decision.

## CHAPTER XV.

"WHAT MAY NOT HAPPEN IN A MINUTE!"

It was the day of the coronation.

The warm sunshine penetrated into every part of Moscow where piles of brick and stone did not deliberately shut it out.

Since the darkest hours of the night before few had slumbered. Hundreds of thousands of people thronged the streets.

Ten o'clock A. M. was the hour appointed for the be-

ginning of the ceremonies. Two hours earlier the high ramparts of that great fortress, the Kremlin, were surrounded by throngs of Russian subjects, believed to number three hundred thousand.

On monster stands outside the Cathedral of the Assumption were posted multitudes of favored guests—among them not a few royal personages, for whom there was no room inside the sacred edifice.

For the cathedral was a tiny place, entitled to its dignified name only by the great magnificence and costliness of its appointments.

Half of the floor space inside was taken up by the famous tombs, but these were hidden from view on this joyous occasion by a golden screen, into which were wrought tons of the precious metal, the gold, in turn, being adorned by well-nigh innumerable jewels.

Under a canopy was a platform on which rested three thrones.

And before this platform, with every eye turned upon it, were eight hundred men and women, fully three-quarters of whom were among the most famous personages in this living world of ours.

Foreign kings, princes, commissioners, ambassadors—the illustrious people who make the history of the world—were mere spectators here. To give a list of these notables of the first water, and to enumerate their deeds, would be to invite despair.

Among the small American contingent stood Bert Alden, Mr. Morton and Tom Unger.

The simplicity of their attire was in decided contrast with the gorgeousness of the raiment displayed on all sides.

Beauty and jewels, manhood and valor, were there, amid a scene and in an environment of inexpressible gorgeousness.

One element was lacking—gayety!

Over all hung that great, gaunt, hideous specter that pervades every Russian coronation in this nineteenth century—the awful fear that the rejoicing will be turned into the acme of tragedy by an attempt to assassinate the emperor.

Bert Alden's face was as white as chalk. His lips were too rigidly set to quiver.

Tortured, relentlessly, by two conflicting senses of duty, he had at last made up his mind—had come to a decision—and had taken a course of action, which, whether blame-worthy or praiseworthy, could not now be receded from.

In that crowd of eight hundred tightly hemmed-in people he had desecrated the face of Vera Menikoff-Souvieski.

Only her pallid face, stern, rigid and almost distorted—only her face and a glimpse of her white, rounded beautiful arms—were visible to the young American.

As for Vera, it is doubtful if she saw any one in the assemblage. Her gaze was fixed absorbedly upon the three thrones, as yet unoccupied.

The savage gleam in her eyes was little less than maniacal.

"A beautiful fiend!" hissed Bert, to himself. "Was my note received in time? Oh, what a fool, idiot, I was! I should not have entrusted so important a message to the mail; I should have conveyed it in person."

Gazing over such a sea of faces, it was difficult to distinguish any one.



Finally, to his great joy, Alden recognized the face of Monsieur Petroffski.

"Thank Heaven, he is here!" murmured Bert. "Yet, why is he so far distant from her? To crush his way through this throng, and reach her side, would require a full minute."

But the longer he gazed at these two faces that were so full of interest to him, the more clearly Alden understood the situation.

Monsieur Petroffski had not yet caught sight of the young woman. Her back being turned squarely to him, it was difficult for the police agent to recognize her.

Now a slight commotion was noticeable in the eager assemblage.

The dowager empress, mother of the young czar, had entered.

Received by a numerous party of priests, she was escorted to one of the thrones.

Following her came a stream of foreign princes and princesses, who took the places assigned to them.

Now the priests began a slow, impressive chant.

A herald, in gorgeous old-time livery, and bearing the emblem of his office, a gold trumpet, approached the thrones.

Ministers came in his train, bearing on cushions the massive, priceless insignia of the imperial office.

A quartet of Russian grand dukes fairly tottered under the royal robes of ermine, which they bore up to the dais.

Higher rose the chant of the priests.

Enter the young czar, as firm, proud, haughty as ever, though pale withal.

Enter, at his side, the young czarina, looking far more beautiful than her devoted Russian subjects had ever seen her before.

But Bert Alden's eyes were not upon the imperial pair.

Thrilling with dread, he could not remove his gaze from the terrible eyes of Vera Souvieski.

That young woman was gazing straight at the oncoming young emperor.

But Monsieur Petroffski's keen, searching eyes were still roving from one woman to another.

"He has not recognized her," groaned Alden, inwardly. "He is as far from her as ever. Oh, what may not happen in a minute!"

Bert trembled so from desperation that he was but barely able to keep from shouting out a warning to the helpless police agent.

The surging of the throng turned him forcibly about against his will, and the young American found himself looking at the czar and czarina.

Once, as his gaze shifted, he perceived, standing near the door, in the uniform of a German general, that astute police agent, Monsieur Jabowski.

The sight gave Alden hope, but only for an instant.

Jabowski was even farther from Vera Souvieski than his baffled aid, Petroffski.

Bert's fingers were tightly clinched.

Not once did he look away from Vera.

At last the imperial party reached the dais.

Watching Vera's face, studying every fleeting change of expression, Alden felt that he could rightly read her very thoughts.

His conclusions took form in these ejaculations under his breath:

"Now she hesitates! She wonders if the emperor presents a sufficiently good mark. Her weapon is the revolver. She could not hope to reach him with a knife. A bomb would be equally out of the question. Ah! the czar has escaped for a moment"—for the imperial Nicholas and his consort had seated themselves upon their thrones. "Oh, that paralysis would strike that beautiful fiend before she can do her dreadful work!" invoked Bert, in an agony of suspense.

A nearby prince coughed.

Bert Alden almost jumped. To him it had seemed the fair assassin's shot.

Bowing before the young emperor, stood the metropolitan of St. Petersburg.

In his hands the prelate held an open prayer book, which he tendered to the young ruler.

Arising, and standing erect, Nicholas accepted the book. Slowly, but in a firm voice, he read the prayer.

"Good heavens!" thrilled Bert. "Now Vera is fumbling for her weapon. She is ready to shoot!"

At that instant he could have cheered aloud for joy!

Just behind Vera, at last, stood Monsieur Petroffski!

A change, terrible, but inexpressible, came over the girl's face.

Something had happened, though, with hundreds between them, Alden could only guess what it was.

The brief prayer was over. Nicholas again was seated.

"Thank Heaven for Petroffski!" murmured the boy.

"Now the emperor is safe. O-o-o-oh!"

Faintly the ejaculation came from the boy, and was not heard above the sudden, loud chanting of the priests.

Bert Alden's whole frame quivered and collapsed under a new, exquisite torture that utterly paralyzed him.

It was a powerful, excruciating electric current that had overpowered the boy—a current of that indescribable kind that he could associate only with Jules Vinard.

"You have spoiled our plans! Death is the revenge!" The words, inaudible to others, were hissed in his ear.

Two eyes, blazing with fiercest hatred, glowed into his own, but the man was not Vinard.

Instead the torturer was a man who stood a head taller than the diabolical Frenchman.

In short—it was Tom Unger!

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE DUEL OF THE WRISTS.

"Tom Unger, my trusted friend, a nihilist!"

This was the first thought that swiftly traversed Bert Alden's mind.

The horror of the sudden discovery struck him, at first, more forcefully than the realization of his own peril.

Tom Unger, the friend on whose goodness and loyalty he would have staked life, a traitor! Worse, an assassin, a regicide in purpose, if not in reality!

"You have beaten us at one point," whispered Unger, malignantly; "but we have other resources. We shall win—you will perish!"

The emperor having finished his prayer, the priests before him were now reciting one.

As for the tightly crowded spectators, all the followers



of the orthodox Russian church were crossing themselves. Many others, not of that creed, were following their example.

"Listen to that prayer that is being sent up on high," said Unger.

And then came this taunt:

"It is your dirge, the last appeal to Heaven that you will ever hear!"

Bert writhed in torment, yet, held powerless, both physically and in speech, by that fearful, all-dominating electric current, he could not utter a word.

It was impossible, even, for him to moan.

The spectators, absorbed in what was going on on the dais and in its immediate vicinity, paid no heed either to our hero or his vanquisher.

There was no risk of Unger being overheard, for his words reached no ear save the one for which they were intended.

Bert's suffering was not visible to others, for no one looked at him except the fiend who was gloating over his helplessness.

"The czar may yet die before your eyes," Unger confided in his ear.

Oh, for the power to shout one single word of warning! A film formed over Alden's eyes.

He could no longer perceive the figures on the dais.

"Perhaps," gloated Unger, in that same, serpent-like hiss of a whisper, "I may force you to give the signal that shall bring about our great triumph."

Then the next instant:

"No, no, my friend, for when that signal is given not a soul in this building can escape alive—but I must first make sure of you."

"Good heavens!" groaned our hero, inwardly. "That means that the nihilists intend to blow up the cathedral!"

"I am sorry that you cannot see," continued Unger, "how placidly we of the fraternity go to our doom. But no! Your death must come a second before the grand climax."

As these words were whispered the current that was torturing the young American was slightly increased.

What awful physical agonies Bert now endured will probably never be understood by any living being.

Looking upon the doom of the young czar as certain, Alden no longer gave the ruler a thought.

The fear of death was stronger upon the young American than it had ever been before.

He strove to speak, but no sound came forth. The power of that strange force, electricity, was complete!

"As soon as the last word of the prayer is sounded, that shall be the signal for you!" were the next words whispered in his ear.

Would that the priests' invocation might last for an hour! The present agony was not to be compared with the terrors of approaching death, for the young American felt a wild, vain longing to live.

Unger was playing with him as a cat does with the mouse that is helpless under its velvet-topped claws!

To Alden's ears the monotonous tones of the priests came like the tolling of the bell of doom.

Though he could not follow the meaning of their prayer, he felt instinctively that they were pronouncing the last few words.

Then came the final syllable.

"Ah, now I die!"

Simultaneously with this terrible realization, Alden tried to frame a brief appeal to Heaven.

Flash! The word uttered fails to convey an idea of the suddenness with which the next change came.

The current had ceased to vibrate through Bert's being. In the first instant of that change of sensation, he believed that the end had come—that he no longer existed as a mortal.

Then he fell against the shoulder of the nearest bystander.

That stranger, resenting the annoyance, turned his head slightly and frowned.

Quickly a portion of our hero's waning strength came back to him.

Was he safe at last, or was the climax to follow with the swiftness of lightning?

Over Unger's shoulder he saw another face, hard, cold and stern, the square jaw firmly set, the eyes expressing indomitable resolution and a sense of victory.

Monsieur Jabowsky, agent of police, was the possessor of that rigid countenance.

Tom Unger's face, on the other hand, expressed the highest frenzy of rage, and, in the next instant, the lowest depths of despair.

Had the police agent, at the risk of his own life, attracted the overpowering current into his own body? Bert wondered.

It was hardly likely, for Monsieur Jabowsky, whose single idea was to loyally serve the czar, was not at all likely to imperil himself merely to save a foreigner.

Taking pains to keep every portion of his own body as far as possible from Tom's, our hero finally managed, even in those close quarters, to get a glimpse at his late oppressor's hand.

Now he understood it all.

Jabowsky's nearest hand, clothed in a thick rubber mitten, held Unger's wrist in a grip as merciless as that of a vise.

The farthest hand of each man was invisible to our hero, but he could not doubt that on the other side Jabowsky was equally well protected. Through non-conducting rubber the most powerful electric current cannot penetrate.

Now there was another bustle of excitement, connected with the ceremonies that held every other eye enthralled.

Two grand dukes were removing the jeweled collars of the different orders from the neck of the czar.

This done, they lifted the imperial robe of ermine to the emperor's shoulders. Over that they placed in position the diamond collar of St. Andrew.

Absorbed in this imposing spectacle of royal pomp, all were oblivious of the sublime, real drama that was being enacted at the same time—all except the trio of actors.

Now the thought rushed upon our hero that, at last, he was able to call out, as loudly as need be, to bring help to the side of Monsieur Jabowsky.

As if penetrating, by some subtle psychology, this intention, the police agent leaned slightly forward and whispered, just audibly, in our hero's ear:

"Do not interfere, Monsieur Alden."

"Does this rash man hope to save the day all by him-



self?" wondered Bert. "He is drunk with momentary triumph. He will sacrifice the ruler to whom he is so loyal."

"Do not utter a word, I command you," was the agent's next adjuration. "I know what I am doing, better than you do. I will guarantee the safe result. Have confidence in me."

Monsieur Jabowsky was a man of iron. Unger, too, was far more than ordinary powerful.

Were the latter, even for an instant, able to wrench his nearer hand free, his first move would be to kill Alden.

Not only that; the desperate nihilist might succeed in passing the signal that should bring about the culminating tragedy of all.

But Monsieur Jabowsky's face expressed not one whit less of resolution, as, with rubber-covered hands he gripped tightly those wrists of Unger, that, once free, could wreak all the deadliness of electrocution.

Tom's face was slyly, diabolically suggestive of a purpose to wait, in the hope of catching the police agent off his guard.

It was a thrilling, magnificent duel—a tourney in which muscles and sinews of steel were pitted against each other, and on the result of which hung life and death!

At this crisis, under the bondage of Monsieur Jabowsky's stern injunction, Bert Alden felt himself the most helpless being in all that throng.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE LAST STROKE OF MALICE.

Receiving the crown from the metropolitan, young Nicholas placed it upon his own head, since there was no one greater than himself to bestow it upon him.

Now the czarina's crown, too, was handed to him, and the lovely empress knelt at his feet.

Lifting his own crown long enough to touch hers lightly to his head, Nicholas bent over his spouse and placed the imperial emblem upon her brows.

Now the coronation was completed, and their majesties seated themselves upon their thrones.

And this moment the bell in a nearby tower rolled out the news to the countless thousands who were waiting. From hundreds of other steeples came the clanging, responsive chorus, and the tidings were swiftly carried far beyond Moscow itself.

But all this, so eagerly followed by others, passed like an unreal dream to Bert Alden.

He had eyes, ears, senses only for the two grim gladiators who were waging the greatest battle of their lives with their wrists alone.

Now followed a weary monotony of prayers and other religious observances, after which congratulations were showered upon the imperial pair.

It lasted for hours altogether, and when all was over, and their majesties and their long train passed out, a sigh of relief went up from all the spectators.

Not one had there been among them who had not feared that some tragic event would be the outcome.

Now that it was over, and the coronation and all its attendant pomp and splendor had been but harmonious parts of a jubilant occasion, few there were who gave any thought to the nihilists.

The spectators were leaving the cathedral as quickly as the means of egress would permit.

"Monsieur Alden," spoke Jabowsky, softly, "wait and go with me."

Mr. Morton was preparing to leave, but Bert, thus cautioned, dallied behind.

"Come, come, lad," laughed Mr. Morton, turning to him, "don't look so dazed. Don't you intend to come with us?"

"I will see you at the hotel, sir," was Bert's evasive answer.

"And you, Unger?" added Mr. Morton.

But Tom's lips were sealed tightly.

Monsieur Jabowsky spoke for him.

"The gentleman first has a brief engagement with me."

Mr. Morton looked surprised, then annoyed, next alarmed.

A sudden fear that our hero might be in trouble crossed his mind.

"I will be with you in a short time," whispered Bert, to his host. "I understand the fear that has come into your mind, but I assure you that no harm threatens me. Will explain when I see you again. Don't be alarmed."

Mr. Morton looked vastly relieved, though more puzzled than ever, and passed out, leaving our hero to follow when he got ready.

On the other side of the chapel Alden got a momentary glimpse of Vera Menikoff-Souvieski. She had taken the arm of Monsieur Petroffski, and no one observing her careless, debonair manner would have guessed at the truth—that she was hopelessly a prisoner charged with the most heinous crime in the Russian calendar.

"Come!"

It was Monsieur Jabowsky who spoke. He was pushing Tom Unger ahead of him. Four more men, undoubtedly police subordinates, approached, and one of them, after a swift glance at his chief, put on a pair of rubber mittens.

This second man then seized hold of one of Unger's wrists, and Jabowsky and his satellite, surrounded by the others, led their captive out after the departing spectators.

"You will want to see the end of this affair," confided Jabowsky to our hero, "and for your magnificent service to us you are entitled to do so."

Inside the walls of the Kremlin, not very far, in fact, from the Cathedral of the Assumption, is an unobtrusive little building, with the nature of which probably very few residents of Moscow are acquainted.

It is one of the headquarters of the secret police, who are most intimately charged with the safety of the members of the imperial family when quartered in any of the neighboring palaces.

It was to this little building that Monsieur Jabowsky and his aides conducted Tom Unger, and it was there, therefore, that Bert Alden followed them.

Inside was a room of considerable size. It was crowded with *gendarmes* and agents of the secret police.

Several prisoners were there, all heavily manacled by this time. A few of them were women.

Among them was Vera Menikoff-Souvieski. Her hands, crossed before her, were securely manacled.

"See, sir," exultantly cried Petroffski, pushing his way



forward to his chief. "Here is the weapon with which Madam Vera had planned to do her deadly work."

He held up a revolver which he had snatched in the cathedral from the young woman's hand as she was drawing it from her pocket.

"You have failed, sister, but nobly," cried Tom Unger.

"Your sister?" grimly echoed Jabowsky.

"Yes, we are brother and sister in the cause," hoarsely laughed Unger. "I hope, sister, that my failure has been as noble as yours, and that we shall both meet our fates with the calm stoicism of true nihilists."

Neither Jabowsky nor his aide released their hold of Unger, but, on the contrary, the former called out to another subordinate:

"Search this prisoner. I believe that he has a battery somewhere about him that is powerful enough to kill at a touch."

The man so commanded did not flinch. After likewise drawing coverings of rubber over his hands, he searched until, from one of the nihilist's pockets, he drew out a small, compact, strange-looking storage battery. This was connected with wires that ran to Tom's wrists. The battery, operated by tiny buttons, could be made to give out a current strong enough to kill a human being.

"It was one like that," commented Jabowsky, aloud, "that was found upon the corpse of Jules Vinard."

"Then he was killed by that fall from the train?" interposed Alden.

"Undoubtedly."

"He died like a true martyr to the cause," added Unger, half sadly. "I suppose you wonder, Monsieur Alden, how it happened that I so opportunely saved you from him? I do not mind telling you. It was all rehearsed between poor Vinard and myself. He knew that he was to take the fall from the train, and he was quite resigned to being maimed or killed. It was done that I might ingratiate myself into your favor. It was the only way that my nihilistic brethren saw of getting me into the cathedral. Surely, if we worked upon your gratitude, and that of Mr. Morton, we reasoned, then your friend would be willing to get me an invitation to the inside of the cathedral. You know now how well that part of our plot worked."

"But you are an American," interrupted Bert, indignantly.

"That is to say," corrected Unger, "I have lived in America most of the time since I was sixteen years old; but I am a Russian by birth, and a true nihilist at heart."

Monsieur Jabowsky, meanwhile, was calmly occupied in dismantling and destroying that infernal little storage battery.

"Oh, that," laughed Unger, surveying the wreck in the police agent's hands, "was a mere toy compared with what I could show you. For it was I, mind you, who, if you had not seized me when you did, was to have passed the signal that would have traveled outside, and would have resulted in the exploding of a mine that would have wrecked the cathedral and killed every one in it."

"A mine?" gasped Monsieur Jabowsky, turning absolutely white and trembling.

"Oh, yes," vaunted Unger. "It would have been a shame, to be sure, to have involved hundreds of other people in the destruction of that imperial peacock of yours, Nicholas Romanoff. It was decided that my sister over

there"—nodding to Vera—"should first attempt the emperor's life with her pistol. If she failed in that, I, during the excitement that would have been sure to follow her shot, was to pass the signal, and the mine would have been exploded."

"I can hardly believe you," muttered Jabowsky, turning from pale to a sickly green.

"Oh, but it's true, nevertheless; and, since the mine is no longer of any use to us, I don't object to telling you how you can find it, and explore it for yourself."

With an air of cool bravado Unger helped himself to a seat on a nearby bench, and told his horrified listeners the location, the entrance and other particulars of the mine that the nihilists had succeeded in laying under the cathedral.

"To think that I never suspected this!" roared Monsieur Jabowsky, pounding himself upon the chest with both his clinched fists. "Oh, I am an ass—a dolt! I am not fit to be even a uniformed *gendarme*! Despite all my elaborate precautions our blessed czar's life was saved only by the chain of events that followed my receipt of a letter from Monsieur Alden, in which he warned me to be on the lookout for Madam Vera, who, he believed, had been deputed to kill the czar."

"It was all a glorious dream," answered Unger, sadly, with the manner of one who believes that he has lost in a noble cause. "So thousands of us have plotted, and we have spent millions of money in an heroic effort to rid Russia of her tyrant, only to have our dearest hopes foiled by this infernal meddler of a boy."

The last words died out in a shriek. The fearful scene that followed caught all its principal actors off their guard—all but Tom Unger.

Springing up with the suddenness of a panther, he clutched Bert Alden's throat in his fingers and bore our hero to the floor.

"You can't save him! You can't tear us apart!" belowered the enraged nihilist, as several of the secret service men jumped to the young American's rescue. "No, you can't do it!" he shouted, wildly, as they tried in vain to pry his interlaced fingers apart.

The veins of Bert Alden's head swelled to the point of bursting.

Tom Unger, wrought to the last notch of fury, proved himself possessed of the strength of four men—or demons!

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### CONCLUSION.

There was only one way of saving Alden from his assailant's murderous fury, and Jabowsky's took that means.

"Stand away!" he ordered, to his policemen; a command which they promptly obeyed.

A pistol appeared in the police agent's hand. Grasping it by the barrel, he bent over Unger.

Thump! The heavy butt descended upon Tom's cranium with a force that stretched him motionless.

Rolling the senseless body, as unceremoniously as if it had been a log, from its position astride of Bert Alden, Jabowsky grasped our hero by the hand and helped him to his feet.

"Handcuff the scoundrel!" cried the agent; and Unger's



limp arms were roughly yanked into position, and manacles fitted to the wrists.

"Is he dead?" questioned Bert, regarding his enemy's white face, and a cut on his head from which the blood was flowing.

"Oh, no," Jabowsky grimly retorted. "His confessions may be useful to us yet, and I know where to strike when I do not want to kill."

As if in confirmation of this vaunt, Unger opened his eyes.

"You are brave," he sneered, to the police agent, "when surrounded by your aides."

"I do my duty at all times," responded Monsieur Jabowsky.

The other captives were at this moment brought in by secret service men.

"Monsieur Alden, I will beg you to excuse me for a little while," remarked the police agent, with a politeness that he seldom took the trouble to display. "I must interview all of these prisoners."

This was a hint at dismissal. Bert accepted it as such.

"One moment, though," and Monsieur Jabowsky's voice was almost husky as he rested one of his massive hands on our hero's arm. "I owe you a deeper debt of gratitude than I can find words to express. Your first meeting with me was not of a nature to give you a kindly impression of me, yet you have done me a greater service than any man ever did for me before. Monsieur Alden, I thank you from my heart."

"May I ask one little favor, then?"

"Any favor at my command."

"I would like to take leave of——"

"Of Madam Vera?"

"Yes."

"You may do so; privately, if you wish."

"No, though I thank you. I will speak to her here, and then go."

The police agent nodding, Bert crossed the room to where Vera sat. A *gendarme*, obeying Jabowsky's significant look, followed, and silently removed the manacles from her wrists.

Not once had Vera's debonair manner deserted her. Rising now, and offering her hand, she cried:

"So, Monsieur Alden, you come to take leave of me. I regret that I cannot receive you in my parlor."

"Do you know," asked Bert, taking her hand in his, "that it is due to me that you are here?"

In spite of himself he looked decidedly shamefaced.

"Oh, yes, Monsieur Alden. Have you come here to supplicate my forgiveness?"

"No," replied Bert, looking steadily into her eyes, though speaking gently, "no, for I cannot feel that I have done wrong. Had I not sent to Monsieur Jabowsky the note that I did, I fear you would have succeeded in killing the young emperor."

For a moment Vera's manner changed from gay to sad.

"Do you know," she went on, "what will become of me?"

"I tremble to think of it."

"I do not, for such is the spirit of those who serve our cause. But I would have met happily any fate had I but succeeded."

"While I do not blame myself, under the circumstances,

for having brought you to this fate," Bert continued, though his voice shook, "I should be glad to know that you do not blame me, either."

"I do not," declared the girl, without hesitation. "Monsieur Alden, you followed your own sense of duty, as I did mine. I would have no one do less than to obey his own sense of duty. Let us part friends. Monsieur Alden, I admire you."

"And I admire you," came fervently from the boy. "Madam Vera, I admire you equally as much as I detest the principles of the 'cause' that you follow."

"We understand each other," said Vera, pressing his hand once more. "Now I am going to ask you to do me a service. Go to my husband, Souvieski, who is your friend. Poor fellow! He has a noble heart, though he is foolishly loyal to our czar. Tell him, from me, how much I regret that I was forced to make use of him and bring upon him what he will consider disgrace. I do not dare hope for his forgiveness. Good-by, Monsieur Alden—good-by, my friend."

"Good-by."

A last pressure of hands and Bert hurried from the room.

"One moment, Monsieur Alden!" cried Jabowsky, hurrying after him. "In future, when you wish to travel through Russia, secure from annoyance, communicate with me—Third Section, St. Petersburg. My name is somewhat influential in this empire."

"I thank you."

When Bert reached the hotel he found a new ordeal before him. He was obliged to relate to Mr. Morton the story from beginning to end of his strange, unwilling connection with the nihilists.

The next day, pursuant to his promise, he visited Lieut. Souvieski and delivered to that young officer Vera's message.

"I do not blame you, my friend—I thank you," returned Souvieski, though his eyes were wet. "I am convinced that she is a nihilist—therefore she is dead to me."

Mr. Morton and our hero remained two days more in Moscow, then returned to St. Petersburg.

What became of Vera is unknown outside of Russian official circles.

Equally uncertain is the fate of Tom Unger.

Siberia, that vast, insatiable domain of exile, has doubtless engulfed them.

Bert Alden is back in Germany, pursuing his university studies.

Having related how a brave American boy frustrated the fearful plot of the nihilists to present the young Russian czar with the black scepter, I have finished.

Yet, though a Frenchman, I linger before my audience one moment more to take off my hat to that pluckiest, bravest, manliest of youths—the American boy.

THE END.

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